Richard Marsten

MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

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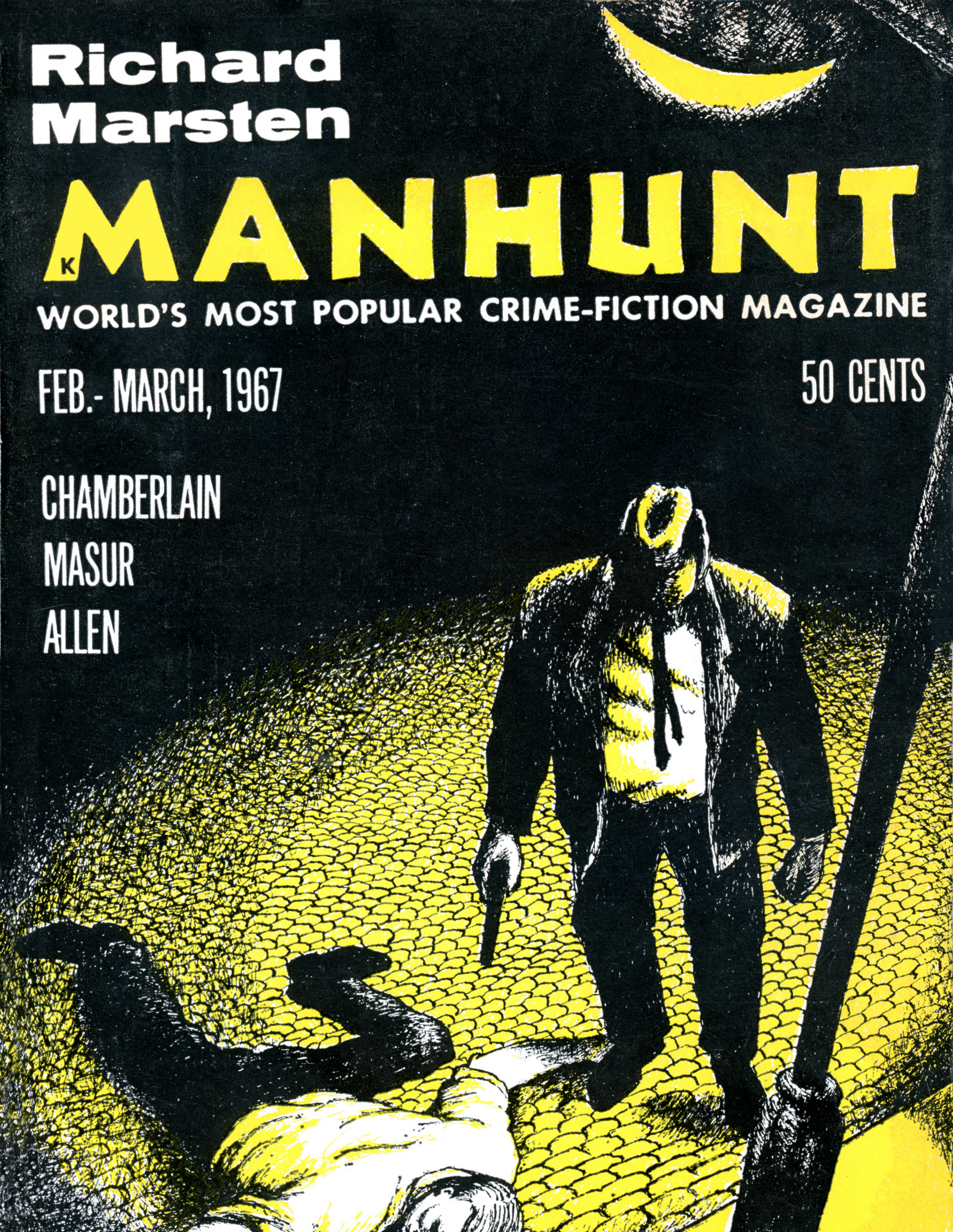

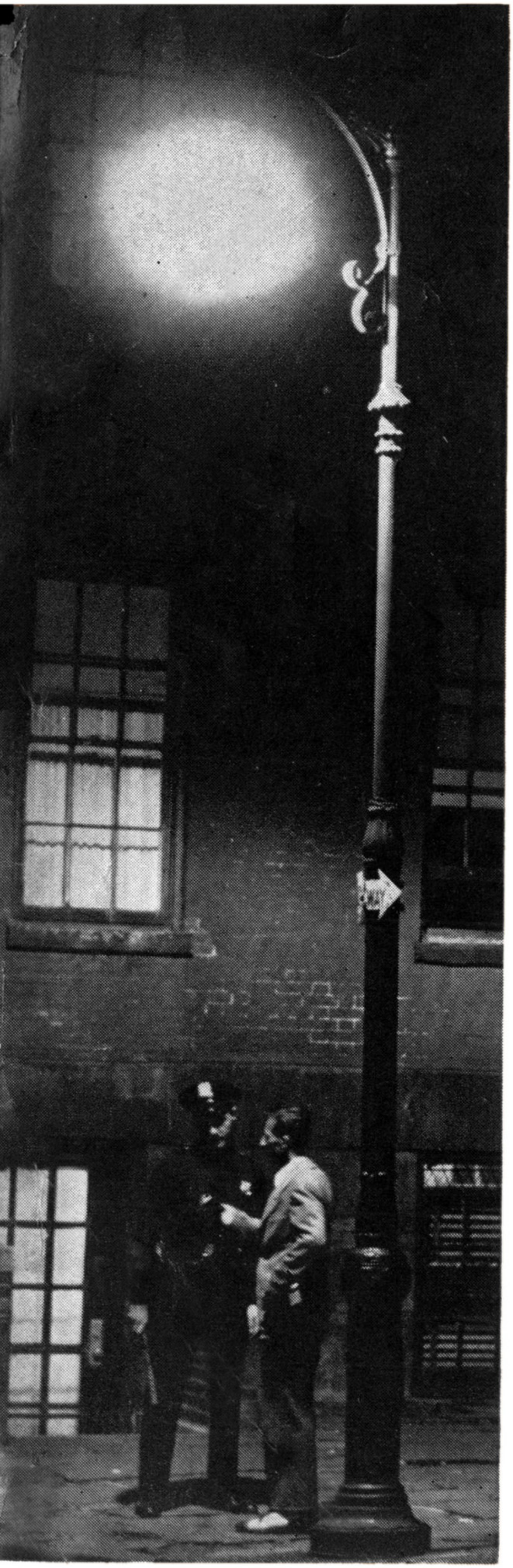

the word is out . . . . . .

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VOL. 15, NO. 1

MANHUNT

FEB.-MAR., 1967

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big time carly

Carleton Stratford Bryan was a precocious child. With single-minded dedication he directed his considerable talents along the crooked path of life.

BY ERNEST CHAMBERLAIN

CARLETON STRATFORD Bryan was born in the hills of Davis County, Kentucky, on the 1st of December, 1920. His pa, Matthew Bryan, was a moonshiner, but he never made much money because he drank more and gave away more of his merchandise than he sold. He got himself shot to death by a competitor two days after little Carly's fifth birthday, and the day after the funeral Carly's ma burned her black dress, put her go-to-town gingham on, dressed Carly and his two older sisters in their Sunday clothes, wrapped them as warmly as she could, and they all walked away from the little log cabin and none of them ever saw it again.

It was a cold, crisp day, and the

smell of snow was in the air. Their breaths made little white clouds in front of them as they walked. Their fingers and toes tingled before they'd gone very far, but none of them paid any attention to it at all. They were all too excited about the big adventure to worry about little things like walking, or like cold fingers and toes. They walked down the trail, crossed Abraham Creek, and on down out of the hills to Abraham's Corners, walked right through the settlement with all the tongues wagging, and they didn't stop until they got to the railroad depot in Owensboro. It was the first time any of them had been to the city. It was the first time the children had seen an automobile.

They all got on the train for Evansville, Indiana—so far away none of them could imagine just how far it was. Everything is relative, and none of them had anything in their past lives to compare the 40 mile trip with. Evansville, on the north bank of the Ohio River, was to be where Carly spent his boyhood. Everything before that didn't count, because all he could ever remember of his birthplace was his hound dog, Dog, and the constant gnawing in his belly. Carly had kicked and screamed—he didn't cry—when he'd had to leave old Dog behind, but he soon got over the separation, because the sights and sounds of Owensboro, and the jerking, bouncing ride behind the big, smoking locomotive and its screaming whistle soon erased even that memory.

Rachel Bryan had $44.00 rolled up in her handkerchief the day they climbed down off the train in Evansville. It was the 8th of December, 1925. She had the $44.00, a skinny, black haired, pale little daughter named Ethel Ruth, nine years old; another shy, scrawny, anemic little girl named Lucinda Lou, seven years of age; and Carly. Carly was the smallest, palest, skinniest of all—but he was louder, meaner, more quarrelsome and more trouble than the two older girls combined. Rachel had the money, her children, and for the first time in her life, she thought, her freedom. Life was just beginning for all of them. Not one of them missed Matt Bryan; that is, not in the way most people miss their husband or father when he's just been killed and buried and left on a hill a long ways off.

Even in those days $44.00 wouldn't go very far, but none of them were worried about a thing. They'd never known much money, and didn't miss it. Not even with Christmas soon to come. The first thing they had to have was a place to live, and Rachel found a little unpainted, unfurnished, dilapidated three room house on Walnut Street, near Eighth, for $12.00 a month, and rented it. It had a coal shed out back, a two-hole privy that was the first one they'd ever had, a big yard with three weeping willow trees in it for the kids to play in, and a nail

keg mailbox in case any of them ever got any mail. The place looked like a dream castle to all of them.

With Ruthie, Cinda, and Carly trailing her and taking in all the sights of the city, Rachel went to a used furniture store on Main Street and bought two worn mattresses, an old kerosene cook stove, a coal burning Ben Franklin for the front room, a rickety dresser, a kitchen table and four cane bottomed chairs, and a kerosene lamp. That's the way they started.

Rachel could have gotten help from some of her own relatives back in Kentucky, but she was too proud, or stubborn, to ask any of them for anything. They'd been against her marriage to Matt in the first place, and she hadn't been in the mood to listen to their "We told you so's." Matt had a brother way off in a town called Madisonville, Kentucky, but she didn't know him, and wouldn't have asked him for anything if she had.

Rachel was just 26 years old. She had felt like an old woman when she came out of the hills, but when she got to Evansville she discovered she wasn't an old woman at all. She had never worked for hire in her life, but that didn't stop her from trying. Being born and raised in the hills she'd never come in contact with the things that worried the city woman, and they meant nothing to her. A week hadn't passed before everyone in downtown Evansville knew about Rachel Bryan, knew she was a young widow who'd just moved in from Kentucky, that she had three young children to feed, and that she was looking for work. Any kind of work. The only trouble was, no one had a job for her; not even a part time Christmas job.

The little money she had went fast, and she still hadn't found a job. Christmas came and went, and she hadn't found a job. The rent came due, and she hadn't found a job.

Rachel was a good looking, rosy cheeked, healthy looking woman. Good figure. Strong. When she walked the downtown Evansville streets she had a sensuous wiggle that drew the male eyes after her. The men looked and the women began to talk. None of the housewives would hire her for cleaning work, and none of the businessmen would hire her because they were afraid of their wives. No one would give her work, so she made her own. No one helped you in the Kentucky hills. You helped youself. Rachel had a natural, marketable commodity. The landlord was her first customer.

After that, due to his word of mouth advertising, things began to look up for the Bryans. The kids were all too young to understand what was going on. Being children of nature, you might say, it wouldn't have mattered, anyway. They could understand food on the table, and new shoes and gingham dresses and overalls, and coal for the stove. None of them ever said it aloud, but

they were all glad Matt Bryan was dead. Otherwise they never would have moved to town. They were all very happy with their new home and new life. Especially Rachel. She loved the city. And the men were generous with her.

Then in January, 1926—just after New Year's day—Mr. Mueller, the truant officer for downtown Evansville, came to see Rachel. The children would have to start school. None of them had thought about school at all.

"The girls should have been in school before now, Mrs. Bryan. They'll have to start in the first grade, with the younger children. The boy can start with them, too."

Rachel wasn't embarrassed because Ruthie and Cinda had never gone to school. All she said was, "There weren't no school where we lived," as though that explained everything. There actually had been a little log schoolhouse at Abraham's Corners, but none of them had ever gone—including herself.

"No school? Where on earth could that be, Mrs. Bryan?"

"In Kentucky."

"Oh, yes. I see. Well, it's different here. They'll have to go to school in Indiana."

Though she had named Kentucky, it had never been Kentucky to any of them. It had just been a miserable cabin in the hills; cold and miserable in the winter, and hot and miserable in the summer, with never enough to eat, no good shoes in the cold months and none at all in the warm and hot months. It would have been too simple to say there wasn't anything to read, and no occasion to write, so there had been no need to learn to read and write, because it was just a waste of time. But it was different now. That was all in the far away and past. The kids should go to school and learn things, like the city kids.

". . . and it's the law, Mrs. Bryan. They've got to go to school . . ."

The law. That did, indeed, mean they had to go. The law hadn't meant much to them before. It had just been a word. It had just been something they'd heard about, without really knowing what it meant, and didn't apply to the Kentucky hill people. Rachel vaguely remembered hearing the word that time they'd come looking for Matt, to take him away to the army. And she'd heard him use the word, too, after he'd run away from the camp and come back home. But in Evansville you had to do what the law said, and Mr. Mueller said the law was the kids had to go to school.

So, for the first time in their lives Ruthie, Cinda, and little Carly started to school, and for the first time in their lives they mingled with other children. It was another exciting item in the series of new and mysterious things that had been happening to them ever since the rifle ball had altered the course of their destinies.

The two girls were excited about

going to school, and liked it, and liked the other children, and liked the teacher right from the start. But little Carly was something else. Rachel had been apprehensive when she took them the first day, because she'd known for a long time that her son was—well, different. But even she didn't have the least idea just how different he was.

Stanley Hall School on Chandler Avenue seemed like the biggest building in the world to Ruthie, Cinda, and Carly. They didn't know there were so many kids in all the world, either. The principal, Mr. Chancellor, was a small, prissy, nearsighted man, popular with all the children, except some of the older boys, and little Carly, who never got to know him. Carly didn't like him at all, from the very beginning, because of the way he peered through his glasses like a hoot owl. It didn't matter, because Carly didn't attend school for long, anyway. Less than half a day.

About mid-morning of that first day little Carly had to go, and he did like he'd been doing all his life; he didn't ask anyone, or tell anyone, but just got up and went outside and let fly off the schoolhouse steps, with the door standing open behind him. All the other children in the first grade classroom, and the teacher, could see him standing spraddle legged out there, and could see and hear what he was doing. After the initial shock the children started giggling, then laughing and shouting and pointing, and it nearly broke the class up. The teacher was horrified, at the act and at the breach of discipline. She was trying to restore order, without much success, when Mr. Chancellor came running in the door. He had a hard time getting the facts. When he did his hoot owl eyes settled on Carly with a look of doom.

Mr. Chancellor took a long, wooden paddle from his coat sleeve and advanced on Carly. At first, Carly couldn't understand what was going to happen, because no one had ever lain a hand on him in his life, but when Mr. Chancellor grabbed him by one arm and whacked him with the paddle Carly got the message. He went berserk. He gave a high, shrill scream of rage, jerked the paddle out of the principal's hands, and swung it with all his might right between the startled man's legs. Carly was a little five year old kid, but he was wild with anger, tough and wiry; the place he hit Mr. Chancellor wasn't tough and wiry. He went down. His glasses flew off and were shattered on the floor. While he lay writhing and gasping from pain and embarrassment, Carly hit him again and again in the head and face, knocked him bloody and senseless, and didn't stop beating him 'til the paddle splintered in his little hands. The other children stared with awe. None of them moved.

Ruthie and Cinda were terrified. Carly was acting the same way he'd

acted the time Ruthie's tomcat scratched him. He had beaten it to death with a big rock. No one could move to stop him, and if the paddle hadn't broken he might have beaten Mr. Chancellor to death, like he did the tomcat. Carly stood there with the paddle handle in his hand, glared around wildly at all the other children, then ran out the door and didn't stop running until he got home, where he hid out in the coal shed. He had left his coat and cap behind, and it was cold, but he was still so mad he didn't notice the cold much.

That part of a day was all the formal schooling Carly ever had, because he wouldn't go back, and no one could make him. There weren't enough truant officers in Evansville to catch up with him, and after two or three weeks of trying, they simply gave up. The police looked for him, too, but only halfheartedly. They thought what he had done was hilarious.

Rachel didn't try to do anything with Carly, either. She just stared at him with a peculiar look in her eyes and said, "He's going to be mean as his pa was." Ruthie and Cinda were ashamed of their little brother, but they kept on going to school, and after awhile the sniggering and teasing died down.

After that half day of school Carly pulled further and further away from everyone. Rachel and the girls saw him less and less. He became a five year old loner.

It didn't take little Carly long to learn what money was. He first first learned about it when some of the men from the C&EI railroad yards came to see his ma. Sometimes they'd give him a nickel or dime to get rid of him. Then he learned how to get it out of their pants pockets when they sometimes left them on a chair in the front room. His ma put an end to that, because too many of the men complained about it, so she made sure they undressed in the bedroom.

One day Carly tried sneaking in there, but what he saw on the bed made him temporarily forget all about money. He couldn't understand it at all. He'd seen his pa naked, several times, a long time ago, and he'd seen his ma naked, too. But he'd never seen them naked in bed together, on top of the covers, acting funny like that, and making such funny sounds, like they were hurting, or something. He watched his ma and the man on the bed for almost a whole minute, then backed out of the room and eased the door shut. He kept thinking about it the rest of the day. It had sure looked funny, all right, but somehow he didn't feel like laughing about it. Every time he thought about it he felt funny down inside somewhere. He figured it must have something to do with the money his ma always had since they'd come to town.

Carly got his schooling on the streets of Evansville. On its streets, and in its alleys and poolhalls and

bootlegging joints, and down on the banks of the Ohio River, where most anything was liable to happen. Some of it was day school, but most of it was at night. He got acquainted with tobacco when he was six years old, and from that day he was never without cigarettes in his pockets, and most of the time had one dangling from his lips. He got drunk for the first time when he was seven. He didn't have much to do with any of the kids around Eighth and Walnut and they were to be viewed warily. He picked his friends very carefully, all older than himself, all precocious in the ways of the streets, all tough and mean. He became the meanest of all. By the time he was ten he could give the adult males of Evansville a run for their money at poker and craps, outdrink some of them, and usually had more pocket money than most of the poolroom loafers. He had learned to shift completely for himself, to mistrust humans, especially grownups; to tolerate niggers if they didn't get in his way, and to make T-keys out of spoon handles that would unlock most of the doors in town. His biggest thrill, in those early days, was burglarizing the small stores and business houses along Locust and Sycamore Streets during the night, then hanging around next day to listen to the owners lying about how much they had lost.

Carly was a natural born thief, but in his formative years he got a bigger kick from the breakin than from the things he stole.

One night Carly broke into the Crescent Store and stole a jacket he'd seen in the window and taken a fancy to, two pairs of corduroy pants, three cartons of cigarettes, and a box of Milky Ways. The next night he went by the store just before closing time and saw old man Sims, the owner, arranging coke bottles across the floor, so if anyone came in that way again, in the dark, they'd knock some of them over. It was a challenge little Carly couldn't resist. The old man slept in a room at the rear, and that would make it more fun when he broke in again, and got away with it.

At eleven o'clock that night he took his T-key and unlocked the front door. He didn't really want anything—just wanted to do it, and see what old Sims would do the next night, when his coke-bottle-alarm let him down. Carly stood just outside the door 'til his eyes adjusted to the counter. He heard footsteps out front and froze where he was; he'd left the door cracked open so he could get out in a hurry, and if anyone saw it—especially a cop—he'd be in a jam. He couldn't get out the back way, past old Sims. Whoever it was kept on walking, and he breathed easier.

Somewhere in the alley he heard a dog barking furiously, then the yowling of a cat. The cat ran in the back door, which Sims had left open for air, and came tearing into

the front part of the store. The dog caught the cat in the center of the coke bottles and all hell broke loose. Carly ducked down behind the counter, immobile. His mind or muscles wouldn't work. A dog and cat were the last things in the world he expected to put the finger on him. They knocked the front door open and took off down the street. The silence in the store settled around him again. Then, somewhere near him, Carly could hear breathing and the unmistakable sound of the hammer being clicked back on a gun. The lights came on blindingly. Carly came out from behind the counter as though shot from a gun himself, hit the bottles, and went down. The fall saved his life, maybe, because three fast shots ripped the air where he had been. When he fell he rolled and came up running. He had never been so terrified in his life, and was out the door and running down the sidewalk without knowing how he did it. Three more shots thundered behind him and the bullets splattered around his heels, but none connected. He cut left at Fifth Street, away from Sycamore, zig-zagged through alleys, down past Cook's Brewery, and headed out Eighth for home. Before he stopped running he'd made up his mind to give up the burglary business for awhile.

A good lesson came from the night's experience. He learned that even when you've got everything planned, you've got to leave room for the unexpected and the unlikely. No job's ever so cut-and-dried there's not a chance of a foul up. He didn't find out until he got home that he had a nasty cut on his right knee. It bothered him periodically the rest of his life.

In 1929 the stock market crashed and the big, black depression set in. It didn't mean a thing to Carly, the girls, or Rachel, because they were not dependent on a job for money. Some of Rachel's customers got a little tighter with their tips, but she just enlarged her clientele. As for Carly, he always had all the money he wanted.

Then on his 12th birthday, in 1932, Carly reached the second major turning point in his life. He got a gun. His first.

Dossey Permuth, a neighborhood boy, had a paper route and got tired of walking it. He told Carly he was in the market for a bicycle. Carly went into the bicycle business. He stole one from in front of Central High School, rode it north to the little town of Princeton, ditched it, stole one there and rode it back to Evansville. It was 30 miles each way, but worth the effort. He sold the bike to Dossey for $5.00, a rusty .25 caliber revolver, and a nearly full box of cartridges.

The gun in his hand made Carly feel bigger than he'd ever felt before. He wanted to test it, so that night he filled the cylinder, went down to the Crescent Store, and emptied it into the front of the building. By

the time the police got there he was four blocks away. The gun had worked fine.

For the next two years Carly tried his hand at a little of everything. He stole and sold bicycles now and then, went back to an occasional job of burglary, polished his poker, pool and crap shooting skills, and one time tried a stickup. It didn't work out. He took a streetcar out to Howell, on the southwest side of Evansville, and pulled his gun on a brakie coming out of the L&N railroad yards.

"This is a stickup, mister!" he said.

The brakie looked down at the little masked-faced figure and laughed. He didn't laugh long, because the "little bitty kid" took a shot at him and knocked his striped cap off. The brakie told the police, "... and the little bastard ran across the tracks so fast I couldn't catch him. He's some wild kid, let me tell you."

Carly was smart; he knew he wasn't big enough, yet, to pull armed robberies, so he gave it up until he got older and looked it. His "baby face" held him back. He was having more and more trouble staying out of trouble with the law, anyway. Several of the Evansville cops were customers of his ma, and they didn't bother him, but most of the police department was constantly trying to get him for something or other. They didn't have much luck in those early years.

The best source of pocket money Carly had during that period was bootlegging. He had found an old man at Boonville, 20 miles to the northeast, who made the stuff and didn't care who he sold it to, so Carly would ride his bike up there, buy the raw white whiskey for $2.00 a gallon, take it home and pour it into pint bottles and sell them for 50¢. He never lacked customers.

Carly tried working, one time, just to see what it was like. He got a job at a wood yard on West Franklin Street, when he was 13 years old. He stuck to it for two days. He decided then and there, conclusively, that work was for mules and fools.

He stuck to bootlegging. And everytime he went up to Boonville he'd pass the Hillside Coal Company's big tipple and see the hundreds of miners come and go, and he'd see them come and go at the company store, too. Everybody who worked at the mine, just about, spent most of their paychecks there. Two months after he'd turned fourteen, Carly decided to rob the store. No more little kid stuff. Time for the big time.

He went up and cased the store thoroughly. A T-key wouldn't open the door, but he discovered an easy way to get in. He was small enough to squeeze through an air vent under the building, and once under, took a crowbar and pried an opening in the floor. He got into the big time, all right. He got $360.00

from the cash register, and found $700.00 in a candy box under the counter. Carly didn't bother with anything else, and that fact gave the job the mark of an adult professional. Fourteen years old, and $1060.00 in cash in his pocket. He was ready for turning point number three.

Carly bought himself the first suit of clothes he'd ever had, and the things that went with it, at The Chicago Store, on the corner of Fourth and Locust. He bought an overcoat, a pair of real leather gloves with fur lining, and a felt hat. He threw the old .25 in Pigeon Creek, took the electric traction car to Rockport, up the river from Evansville, and bought himself a brand new .32 short barrel with six boxes of cartridges. He was five feet six inches tall, and weighed 145 pounds—which was as big as he'd ever get—but he felt as big as Goliath.

Then he went back to Evansville to look up his friend, "Big Earl" Poteet.

Big Earl was 28 years old, six feet four, and weighed 220 pounds. He was the toughest and meanest, hell raisingest loafer in town, a two bit pool shark, a drunk, petty thief, and part time pimp on "the line," Evansville's red light district. He also was Carly's hero. Carly found him at the Paradise Billiard Emporium, on Third Street.

"Goddam!" Big Earl said. "Look at Carly!"

Carly grinned, and his chest went out like a pouter pigeon's. "What's the matter? Ain't you never seen a guy dressed up before?"

"I ain't never seen you dressed up before. Where'd you get the glad rags?"

"At the glad rags store—where else?"

"Sure, but I mean, where'd you get the dough?"

"I ever ask you a question like that?"

The pool players had stopped to look him over. They eyed him from head to foot. One of them whistled and said, "Hey, Carly—who'd you rob?"

Carly wanted to tell him, in the worst way, but kept his mouth shut. He wanted to tell all of them, wanted to brag about all his jobs. Silence didn't come easy, in those days, but he kept it. He put the asker down with a searing look from his small brown eyes; eyes that could smolder and burn when he wanted them to. When he was angry they smoldered and burned anyway.

"Come outside," he said to Big Earl. "I want to talk to you."

"So talk."

"Come on outside. I want to ask you something private."

Outside, night had come. It was turning colder. The street lights shone faintly in the darkness. They made a strange looking pair, walking along side by side. A grown man, who amounted to nothing good, and a young boy, trying to emulate him. The chief of police had tried to break them up as a team,

but hadn't been able to. They walked along in silence for half a block. Carly turned the collar up on his new coat, and thought how good it felt around his neck.

Big Earl said, "So what's on your mind, Carly?"

Carly didn't answer right away. They walked another half block, then he said, "I want you to take me out to Rosie's place."

Big Earl knew better than to laugh. He didn't answer right away, either, and Carly didn't press it. Big Earl glanced sideways and down at the boy walking along beside him. A strange one. He'd been a strange one, too, he supposed, when he was a kid, but not like this one. Fourteen years old, and he was 28, but the kid was 'way ahead of him in a lot of ways. Big Earl didn't like to admit it—not even to himself—but the kid was sharper than he'd ever be. And the kid carried a gun most of the time, knew how to use it, and might at any time. Big Earl thought about how he'd never had the guts to carry one. He knew the kid looked up to him—and he knew that *he* looked up to the kid. They leaned on each other. And he respected Carly. Sometimes he thought maybe the kid was a little crazy. Not *crazy* crazy, but—different. Anyway, he knew better than to antagonize him, even if the kid did want to go out to Rosie's.

Big Earl said, "Okay, Carly. If you want to go out to see the girls, that's what we'll do."

They walked on down to the line. Past the rows of houses with whores sitting in the front windows, knocking and beckoning to them as they passed. They were always trying to get Big Earl in, and he wouldn't have had to pay, either. As a matter of fact, several of them paid him, from time ot time, for his services.

When they got to the big, two storied yellow house Big Earl didn't bother to knock; just turned the knob, stood aside for Carly to enter, then followed him in. Carly's eyes were taking everything in, especially the four half naked girls sprawled around the big parlor. He couldn't think of them like his ma, or like Ruthie and Cinda, though he'd seen all of them naked. But his excitement mounted, and he thought of the times he and Ruthie had stripped all their clothes off in the bedroom and played with each other. He could feel the churning down inside him, and the only thing that kept him from making a fool of himself was the fact Rosie was coming down the stairs. Her eyes were on him, and he could feel the flush rising up his face.

"Get that kid out of here!" was the way she greeted them.

"Now, Rosie—take it easy," Big Earl said.

The girls were watching with varied degrees of interest. Some of them had smiles on their faces.

"Take it easy, hell! What's the idea bringing a kid in here? Don't

I have enough trouble with the cops without you—"

"Rosie, this is Carly Bryan. His ma's Rachel Bryan."

"Rachel Bryan! Are you crazy? Get him to hell out of here!"

"Now, Rosie—"

"Goddamn it! Get him out of here!"

Carly was embarrassed, but her tirade against him killed it. His temper came up, too. "You think I'm a kid?" he asked. He reached down in his pants pocket and pulled out a roll of bills the size of his fist. It spoke loud and clear to everyone in the room. Even Big Earl's mouth dropped open. Carly said, "This make me a man—or a kid?"

Without taking her eyes off Carly and the pocket where he put the money, Rosie took Big Earl aside and whispered, "Okay. This ought to be interesting, anyway. Ought to take him on myself—for God's sake, keep this quiet. If Rachel Bryan knew about it she'd raise more hell than you ever dreamed about."

Carly heard what she said. "Look, Baby—I pay my way. Not my ma. You act like this is my first time in a cat house." It was, and he was scared silly, even though he was no complete stranger to sex. But everything before had been diddling. This was going to be the real thing. At the thought, he got the stirring in his insides again.

All four of the girls had come to life when they saw Carly's money, but his mind had been made up long before he came in. She was small, blonde, about 22, and had been in his thoughts and dreams for weeks. He'd seen her at the window, beckoning to men, and gotten jealous every time. He'd seen her down on Main Street several times, on her day off, and followed her at a distance, watching the sway of her buttocks. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her, and sometimes at night he'd imagine she was beside him in bed, and he'd twist and squirm and play with himself under the covers. But that no longer was enough.

Her name was Sally, and she looked a little strange when Carly picked her in preference to the other girls. The rest of them were giggling and he wondered what the hell they thought was so funny. He glared at all of them.

"That'll be five bucks, little man," Rosie said, holding out a hand.

"Sure," Carly said. "Here's ten. And watch that 'little man' crap. Call me Carly or don't call me anything."

"Sure, honey."

Big Earl was grinning, taking it all in. But he was careful not to let Carly catch him grinning.

As Carly and Sally left the parlor to go upstairs, the little blonde whore looked back and said, "It looks like I'll be rocking the cradle tonight."

"Knock it off, Babe," Carly said. "The first time I heard that corny joke I was *in* the goddam cradle."

Carly was the first virgin Sally had taken to bed since she'd become a whore. She didn't let on that she knew—she didn't, really—but treated him as though he were the best lover in the world. He was better than a lot of the men she'd done business with, and had more money than any she could remember. It was kind of nice to bed down with a smooth skinned, clean boy, instead of a dirty, whiskey smelling, tobacco chewing railroad man. Carly brought Sally back to life, and they bit and scratched and made love all night long.

Carly kept seeing visions of his ma naked, with a naked man on top of her. And he kept having visions of Ruthie and Cinda, both naked, and everything balled up in a hard knot of confusion and excitement, and he couldn't separate the real from the fantasy.

Carly fell in love with Sally, and before morning asked her to marry him. It startled her, but she didn't laugh. He got her to promise she wouldn't have anything to do with anyone but him, and he believed her when she did. He told her he'd give her all the money she ever needed, and they would get married, and he'd take her away from Rosie's. Sally agreed to everything. Nothing was said about when it would take place. She and all the other girls had a big laugh about it after he was gone.

Carly and his roll of money got the run of Rosie's place; he came and went as he pleased, just like Big Earl did, with one exception; Rosie insisted he use the back door, so the neighboring madams and prostitutes wouldn't see him. He didn't like it, but to get at Sally when the urge hit him would have caused him to crawl up and down the steps if he had to.

Late one Saturday night he came in the back door and went up to Sally's room. He opened the door without knocking, and went in. He couldn't believe what he saw. He was staring at Big Earl, stark naked, and Sally, stark naked. Sally was on her back on the bed, and Big Earl was on top. Just like his ma and the railroad man.

Carly pulled the .32 out of his pocket and wavered it from Big Earl to Sally, who had pulled apart and were scrambling off the bed. He could feel hot, scalding tears running down his face. Sally screamed and Big Earl put out one hand as if to stop the slugs he knew were coming. None of them said a word. Carly started pulling the trigger. He saw the big red blotch leap into Sally's breast, and another one in her leg. He saw one of Big Earl's eyes disappear in a shiny, glistening rush of blood. Through a red haze he saw their bodies writhe and twist and sprawl grotesquely on the floor.

Carly didn't come out of it until he realized he was snapping the trigger on empty shells. He stared down at Big Earl and Sally for what seemed an eternity. Then he threw

the gun down, turned and ran down the stairs and out into the night.

Just as he hit the alley Carly heard the girls. begin screaming inside the big yellow house.

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NO RIDERS

BY SHIRLEY DUNBAR

It was against policy . . . but she was a pitiful figure on that long, lonesome highway.

Bertram Reese transferred his foot from brake to accelerator, cussing with every swing of the car. "This is the last time I take advice from a stupid back-woods service station attendent," he muttered.

At least the mountain air was cool, the green tall trees poured shade over the narrow road. His short sleeve shirt was still freshly white, his grey pants maintained a crease with his suit jacket hanging in the back swaying with the car motion. Still talking to himself, Bert said, "This will take a couple hours on my driving time." Glancing at his watch adding, "I hope I can make a few calls before quitting."

His ears were beginning to feel the climb of the slow crawl around the mountains. A capable driver, spending most of his working hours behind a car wheel, employed by the same company for ten years, this new territory was his first big promotion; a chance to bring new business into the firm. Not a high-powered salesman or a particularly smooth talker, his big asset was being a reliable hard worker. Thirty-five years old, his brown hair was beginning to thin with grey taking over the brown. The corners of his brown eyes were deeply lined at the corners, he squinted through the sun glasses, deep furrows rested be-

tween his heavy dark eye brows making his almost pug nose look shorter.

He hesitated turning around, having gone so many miles and unable to judge on-coming vehicles from the next curve; although he had seen no other traffic. Approaching an almost straight span in the road, he considered back tracking to try to find the main highway. Before he had a chance to spin around, he saw a young girl standing by the side of the road.

Braking the car to a halt, he observed how forlorn she appeared, bare-footed with a faded light pink dress clinging to her young body. Leaning out the window, he asked, "Are you having trouble, Miss?"

Staring at him with large blue eyes, as if on the verge of tears, she inquired in a soft drawl, "Could ya let me have a lift, Mister?"

Bert was silent for a few seconds, looking at the decal glued on his windshield, NO RIDERS . . . she certainly would be considered an unauthorized person. Apologetically he answered, "I'm sorry, it's against company policy." Knowing she didn't understand, he said, "Maybe I can help some other way?"

Tears gathered in her eyes, not looking at him but at her dusty feet, she cried, "I jest gotta git to town . . . my Ma's awful sick. We ain't got a telephone." Brushing the back of her hand under her eyes to catch a tear and smearing the dirt, she added, "Hits only a little ways."

Bert was beginning to weaken. Even though his better principles told him not to bother, he said, "O. K., if it's just a short distance." After all, who would know . . . he couldn't leave her stranded here, who knows how long it would be before another car came along to give her a ride.

She climbed into the car. Seated, she tugged on her short thin cotton dress, but it still rested inches above her knees. Inspecting her closer, he couldn't determine her age, she wore no make-up, her unblemished face was streaked with dirt, her long blondish hair was matted as if teased but not styled. Her figure was petite but maturely filled out the cheap dress. He thought she would be a pretty kid with a little soap and a comb, but poor kid, she didn't have a chance living in these hills . . . probably lived in a shack like the many he saw today, leaning with the wind, as if daring a gust to turn it over.

Smiling, trying to put her at ease, he asked, "What's your name, young lady?"

"Jo Belle," she replied in the same soft drawl.

She sat close to the door, almost as if she were afraid, probably unaccustomed to strangers. Staring out the car window, she tapped one foot to the rhythmic beat of the music on the radio. He was glad someone appreciated what he called hill-billy and the announcer referred to as country music.

Looking down from the last crest, he saw a beautiful new gleaming highway. "That must be the new interstate," he said.

Nodding she answered, "Yas," not looking at him.

She certainly was not talkative, he thought. He could see the road leveling ahead and imagined the town she wanted was not too far, probably a few miles more. Slowly the car crept forward, still no sign of a town. Two seedy looking characters were dawdling near the road.

Loudly, she yelled, "Thar!"

As he stopped the car, the two rough looking fellows drew nearer. The younger one came to the car, he leaned up against the door on Bert's side. Bert did not like the savage look on his face. He had brown tangled hair, little pale blue eyes with a slack mouth that gave him a dull appearance.

The girl jumped from the car, running to the older man. The young man slurred in a low slow tone, "What ya doing with Jo Belle, Mister?"

Trying to gain his composure, Bert replied, "I gave the young lady a ride. She was trying to reach help for her mother." Clearing his throat, he added, "She said her mother was ill."

Not taking his eyes from Bert, he called, "Your ma ailin', Jo Belle?"

Bert could feel heat ride up his back at the girl's answer, "Naw."

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, wondering if he could make a dash. The ape leaning on the car looked as if he could tear him apart. He recalled stories of these hill people, lynching etc. . . . He had heard of the code of the hills, but didn't actually know what it was.

The low voice growled again, "Ya hear'd what she said, didn't ya?"

Trying to keep his voice steady, not to betray his fright, Bert uttered, "Yes, I heard. I also know what she told me. Ask her if I harmed her in any way?"

Jo Belle was still standing by the older man's side. Both men were dressed as grimy twins, grey, once white tee shirts showing patches of skin through the large holes, the faded blue jeans were also much worn with holes. The older man asked, "Did he bother ya, Jo Belle?"

Bert allowed a small sigh to come on hearing the, "Naw."

Looking at the inside of the car, the younger man said, "I reckon you know you towed Jo Belle across the state line. Ain't you a law-abidin' man? Ain't that called something like kidnappying, Mister?"

With indignation Bert replied, "Certainly I obey the law."

"Go fetch the sheriff, Claude," the older man ordered.

Stuttering, Bert managed, "Look I have a job to get to." He could surmise their uninterest in his personal problems. This could end up a big mess . . . loss of job . . . some thanks he got for being soft hearted. Out of desperation, he pulled out his bil-

fold. "Look give this to the girl . . . in case her mother does get sick." He stripped all the bills from the inside, handing it to the scowling man.

Taking the money in his huge brown hand, Claude said, "If it's Jo Belle's likin'."

The girl managed to nod her head and Claude still holding the money sneered, "Now you git out of these parts . . . git on that new road and stay!"

"How," clearing his throat Bert repeated, "How do I get there?"

"Right down this here road, thar's a big sign."

Bert had the car rolling down the road before Claude had a chance to say anything else.

Walking over to the girl, Claude said, "You don't think my accent a little heavy do you?"

Laughing, she said, "You deserve an Oscar for your performance, I've never seen you play Hamlet with so much heart. With Fred pumping gas and the three of us acting the road, it won't be long until we can afford the trip to California . . . then we can put our acting ability to the big time test."

The older man, who was older by make-up alone, added, "It's too bad we can't list this as experience. It's like a road tour."

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I was at my desk in the office, watching the second game of the World Series on a rented portable TV, when the phone rang. Koufax had gone to the showers long since, and the Dodgers were hopelessly behind. I switched off the TV and scooped up the receiver.

"Problems, Incorporated."

A woman's throaty voice said, "Mr. Hand? Jerry Hand?"

"Speaking."

"I have a job for you. Could you come over right away?" She gave me the address of a liquor store a few blocks from my office.

"Could you tell me the nature of the job, please?"

I was too late. She had hung up. I held onto my temper. I was in no position to be choosy. The office rent was six weeks overdue, as well as any number of other bills.

I left the tiny office and went down the single flight of stairs to the street.

My office is on Sunset Boulevard in Echo Park. This is the tag end of Sunset, the section never mentioned in the tourist brochures. Immediately under my office was Max's Bar.

Max Main was a hulk of a man, with the battered features of an ex-fighter. In his ring days he had been known as Tank. Not because he was as destructive as one, but because he lost so many fights, and so easily, he got the reputation of throwing them. If that was true, he certainly never got rich at it.

BY CLAYTON MATTHEWS

Jerry Hand was a private eye. His agency was known as, "Problems, Incorporated". But it seemed that Jerry's problems were greater than those of his clients.

DOG DAYS

He was one of the three people necessary under corporation law to incorporate my kooky agency. The only official function he served was taking phone messages for me. When my office phone wasn't answered, people familiar with my habits called Max's Bar and left a message.

Max was behind the bar. He set a glass of beer before me with a hoot of derision. "You and them sports-writers! What great prognosticators you all are! The Dodgers in four games, you said. The way it's going, it'll be over in four all right. But the Twins win it, not the Dodgers."

"Wait'll they get home to Dodger Stadium."

"After yesterday's shellacking, you said wait until today. Koufax's pitching, you said. Well, he pitched all right!" He turned to the only other customer in the bar. "Mr. Hand here once played for the Dodgers. The last year with them he hit .348. He should do so good predicting!"

The man looked at me with interest. "I remember you, Mr. Hand. You quit three years ago and at only twenty-three. A leg injury or something like that, wasn't it?"

"Something like that," I said curtly. I drained the beer, flipped a hand at Max and got out of there. I knew the next question would be: Why wasn't I coaching? Why wasn't I still in baseball in some capacity?

I don't like to be uncivil to people, but any mention of that leg injury ties my stomach up into a sour knot.

The liquor store, all glass in front, glittered with the brilliance of a diamond. Inside, it was as shiny as without, with shelves of bottles, a magazine rack, frozen food freezer, et cetera. In short, it contained everything under the sun, as most liquor stores do nowadays.

A woman leaned on the counter beside the cash register, doing her nails. She had long hair the color of a new penny, a near-perfect complexion.

She straightened up as I approached.

My God, she was big!

Physically she was overwhelming, with an Amazonic thrust of breasts and wide shoulders. Not that she wasn't attractive. She was. However, I like my women scaled to size. I'm not a small man by any measuring stick, but this one would have me walking around on tiptoe.

She looked at me out of glittering blue eyes and said, "Yes, sir?"

"I'm Jerry Hand. You called me awhile ago?"

Her smile came, bringing something more than customer-greeting warmth to her face. "Yes, Mr. Hand. I'm Reba Bright. We were held up last night."

I looked at her without comprehension. I failed to see what a liquor store holdup had to do with me.

"My husband was minding the store. I was upstairs in the apartment where we live. I heard two shots. I came running down the

stairs in back of the store. The register was empty. My husband had been knocked to the floor behind the counter. The holdup man was gone. Tab was dead."

"Mrs. Bright, I'm sorry about that, but it's a job for the police."

"The police were here."

"Then you don't need me. I'm not a private eye. Even if I were, TV and detective stories have inflated the private eye image. They're not nearly so glamorous and effective as they're made to appear." I managed a weary smile. "Anyway, I do kooky jobs for people, jobs they can't do themselves or can't hire anyone else to do. I sometimes perform messy chores, even dangerous ones, but not crime investigations. The police will do the job for you, especially since a murder took place . . ."

"Tab was my dog."

"A dog!"

"My Doberman Pinscher." She pointed to a framed photograph on the wall. The animal was beautiful, with graceful, flowing lines. "I buried him this morning. The police couldn't care less about a dog being killed. To them it's nothing more than a routine liquor store holdup. That's why I called you. I want the man found who killed Tab, Mr. Hand."

What the hell, if she wanted me to track down a dog killer, the least I could do was try. "I get twenty-five a day and expenses, if any."

"That sounds fine, Mr. Hand," she said without hesitation.

Mentally I cursed myself. I could have asked for more. People have been conditioned by that "fifty a day and expenses" line from the private eye yarns. I've never really had the gall to ask that much. Well, maybe I could pad the expense account.

I said, "Is your husband around? I should ask . . ."

"Ralphie! Come out here!"

Ralph Bright's head came just about to his wife's shoulders. He had mouse hair, mouse eyes and a mouse's timidity. He looked like she could chew him up and spit him out for breakfast. And she probably did.

Frequently interrupted by his wife, Bright finally got the story out.

A young man of around twenty, wearing a leather jacket, faded Levis stuffed into half-boots, with a scraggle of beard on his chin, had come in to buy a carton of beer. When Bright glanced up from ringing up the sale, he found himself staring into a gun held in the punk's hand.

"And that's what he was . . . A beatnik punk," Bright said with his first show of spirit. "He talked their kind of talk . . . You know, called me Dads, told me to give him all the bread in the cash drawer. Anyway, I started to empty the cash drawer. That was when Tab came in. Tab was . . . Well, he could look real fierce when he wanted to . . ."

"He *was* fierce," Reba Bright said with feline savagery, "to those people he didn't like."

It was obvious by this time that if Reba Bright had had any choice in the matter she would have much preferred burying her husband this morning instead of her dog.

"Anyway," Bright resumed, "this punk saw Tab coming toward him. He panicked, I guess. He fired at Tab, got him right through the head. He fired a wild shot at me." He jerked a thumb at a hole in the plaster near the ceiling. "Then he leaned across the counter and batted me on the head with the gun barrel, knocking me down. I guess I was out for a minute or two. When I came to, Reba was leaning over me. The punk was gone with the money from the cash drawer."

He leaned toward me, parting thin brown hair to show me a red welt on the head. I wasn't particularly interested in his battle scars.

"You don't know whether he was afoot or in a car?"

"For all I know he could have been horseback like Jesse James." His bark of laughter died a-borning under his wife's glare.

"The police? What did they say?"

The anwser came from her naturally. "Cops!" Her full mouth curled in contempt. "The two who were here quoted the statistics on how many liquor stores were held up in L.A. every twenty-four hours. I quoted back at them statistics on just how many they solve. They left in a huff."

I could have told her that wasn't the way to win friends and influence people. I didn't. Instead I told her I'd nose around and see what I could find out. She made out a fifty-dollar check as a retainer and I left, feeling like a thief myself.

The liquor store was on a typical business block: service station on the corner, a small grocery, a cleaner's, a barber shop, a beauty salon and a bar. I trudged from store to store asking questions without too much hope. Most of the places were closed at night naturally.

But I got a break. The man operating the pumps at the gas station had just today changed over from the night shift and had been on duty at the time of the holdup. He was vague about the exact time, but he had seen a motorcycle pull away from in front of the liquor store in a hell of a hurry. There had been two people on it. He wasn't sure if this had been before or after the shots. "The thing is," he said, "I didn't realize they were shots at the time. Thought it was a car backfiring." He was a bucktoothed individual, with a face as round as a taut balloon.

It seemed unlikely anyone would pull a stickup riding a cycle. Too conspicious. It seemed even more unlikely that . . .

I asked anyway. "I didn't suppose you got the license number?"

He gave me a toothy grin and reeled off the number. He told me he had a thing about license numbers. I didn't ask him what the "thing" was.

It was too easy. Nothing was ever that simple. I jotted down the number anyway. I said, "The police been around asking questions?"

"The cops? Sure, they were around, but I told them nothing. Those dumbheads." He spat, the spittle rolling like a lopsided marble on the oily concrete. "You know what happened last week? I close down at midnight, see? Afterwards, a couple of buddies drop around. We were having a friendly crap game in the station when this prowl car drives up and . . ."

I finally managed to cut his tirade short and escape. On the way back to the office I stopped in a pay booth and called a friend of mine.

I've never been quite sure what niche Sergeant Ernie Thomas fills in the LAPD. One week he's on the Robbery Squad, the next week something else. But they always find him promptly when I call up.

When I gave him the license number I wanted traced, Ernie said, "What's with the cycle set, Jer?" His voice sounded as usual, like a handful of gravel in a tin cup. "Did one of the Hell's Angels lose a chick? My advice to him is to find a new broad. He'd be better off in the long run than hiring you to find her."

"I never knew where you fitted on the force, Ernie. Now I do. You're their stand-up comic. The thing is, you need new writers, new material."

"You think up any knee-slappers, Jer, pass 'em along. I'll use 'em."

I knew Ernie would come through for me. He always did, and it always cost me a bottle of booze. Well, I could put it on the expense account.

That brightened my day somewhat.

I made one more stop on the way back to the office, detouring by the Echo Park Branch of the Public Library. I read all I could find on Doberman Pinschers. I learned they were ideal for police work and had been used by the Marines in the war. It all added up to the fact that they were expensive dogs and could be trained to kill.

How that information would help me find the dog's killer I hadn't the least idea.

Leaving the library, I speculated on where Reba Bright had buried Tab. I was willing to wager it hadn't been in the backyard. There are a number of pet cemeteries around where you can get as an elaborate a burial as Forest Lawn provides for humans. I felt sure that Tab now rested in one of those cemeteries.

I stopped in to ask Max if there had been any calls for me.

"Diana called twice."

"Thanks, Max." I turned to go.

"I told her you'd call back."

"I'll call her, I'll call her," I said irritably and left.

Diana was my ex-wife. She was tall, with a loveliness that grabs you by the guts, with a sweetness of disposition to match Mary Worth's. She also had all the money in the

world. In addition she was the third legal member of Problems, Inc.

Why did I leave her?

Don't ask. Just don't ask.

In the office I debated whether or not to call. But I knew she'd keep calling until she got me. She never gave up on a project. I dialed her apartment in Westwood. She had a penthouse apartment in one of those new towering buildings of steel and glass. On a clear day you could see the Pacific Ocean. On a very clear day you could damned near see the Atlantic.

While we were married, I insisted we live on my salary, and we had an apartment far more modest. Now she could spend her dividends.

You'd think she would be happy. But not Diana.

She said, "Hello? Jerry, is that you?"

I grunted. "Doesn't anybody else ever call you?"

Her low laughter erupted. "Max just called me. He said you'd come in, so I was expecting your call."

"Damn that Max! Someday, so*meday!*"

She laughed again. "Darling, how have you been?"

"I'm fine. And you didn't call up to discuss the state of my health. We talked about that last week."

"Jerry, I have two tickets for the Series games here. All three days, if it goes that long. Max thinks it won't."

I was silent. Like most other Angelenos, I hadn't anticipated the Dodgers' whirlwind finish and had been caught without tickets. Not being a season ticketholder, I wasn't entitled to Series tickets, and I'd refused to join the other nuts in an overnight line for the few tickets available. Diana's must have cost...

"What did you pay for them?"

"A hundred and fifty apiece," she said cheerfully.

"A hundred and fifty! Are you out of your skull, woman?"

"But darling, I know how badly you want to go! I thought you'd be pleased!" she wailed.

I did want to go. I wanted to go so badly my teeth ached. But the only way I could accept her offer was to pay for the tickets and I couldn't.

In a small voice she said, "Jerry?"

"I'm sorry, baby," I said brusquely. "I'm going to be busy. A job."

"Oh, Jerry!" I heard a thudding sound and knew she was stomping her foot in frustration as she had a habit of doing. Then she said suspiciously, "You aren't lying to me? I wouldn't put it past you. Are you, Jerry?"

"Now baby, why would I do a thing like that? Why don't you take friend, Max?" Gently I replaced the receiver.

I didn't get a call back from Ernie until the next afternoon. "The kid who owns the bike is Rod Hunt, Jer. I don't know what this is all about, but I'd watch it. The kid's got a record. Assault with a deadly weapon, drunk driving, hauled up

a couple of times on suspicion of robbery. Served a short stretch as a juvenile. Altogether, not a pretty package." Rod Hunt lived a few blocks away up in the Echo Park hills.

It was an old house, leaning with the slant of the street. The small lawn was coated with brown grass like the pelt of a dead animal. The day was warm, and the front door stood open. The doorbell didn't work. After knocking repeatedly I heard shuffling footsteps somewhere in the rear. In a moment a dumpy woman with stringy gray hair, a face pale and shapeless as a ghost's, and eyes like sunken bruises trudged into view.

"Whatever you're selling, I don't want any," she said in a dead voice. She wore the scent of gin like a perfume.

"Does Rod Hunt live here?"

"He sleeps here when he feels like it."

"Could I speak to him?"

"Like I said, when he feels like it. He ain't felt like it for two, three days now."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He goes kiting off on that machine. He goes and comes, comes and goes."

"You're his mother?"

"Last I heard I was." A spark ignited in her dead eyes. "You ain't the cops, are you?"

"No, not the police. I'm from the insurance company that has the coverage on your son's motorcycle." It was lousy improvising, but the best I could do off the top of my head.

The spark died. "For all of me, you can cancel. Maybe then he'd stop kiting off." She turned and shuffled back into the dimness.

I returned to my car and sat for a time, at a complete loss. I tried to conjure up what an omniscient private eye would do under the circumstances. It was a waste of time. My mind was as empty of ideas as a freshly laundered bedsheet.

Finally I started the car and drove away.

The next day, Saturday, I slept late, had a noon breakfast and drove down to the office. Dodger Stadium is only a stone's throw from Echo Park, and the Stadium-bound traffic was heavy. If I'd been able to swallow my stupid pride, I could have been in the thick of it with Diana.

The office mail had been delivered, the usual quota of bills and one two-page letter, typed single space.

The letter was from a nut. The type of ad I run—"Problems you can't solve? Call me."—attracts nut letters by the dozen. This one was from a guy in his sixties married to a girl a third his age. She was running around with any guy she could find. He didn't want to leave her or divorce her, and he wasn't physically capable of whacking her around. He wanted to hire me to take her out. At least that way he would know where she was and

who she was with. And I could name my own fee. His address told me that he wasn't a poor man. And he had problems, no doubt about that. For a moment I was sorely tempted. I'd told Diana I was working this weekend . . .

I crumpled the letter and tossed temptation into the wastebasket.

At game time I turned on the TV and watched Claude Osteen take the measure of the Minnesota Twins. It was a fine game, and I could have been there. In the seventh inning I switched off the set and went downstairs. Max wasn't there. The patrons were absorbed in the game on the bar set.

The bartender on duty knew me. He drew a glass of beer for me.

"Where's Max?"

"He went to the game." His face brightened. "He went with your ex-wife, Mr. Hand. She came by with tickets and you know Max."

I knew Max all right. I also knew Diana. Her following up on my suggestion that she take Max to the games was a nose thumbing gesture. I nursed my beer, watched another half-inning, then left. I drove up to the Hunt house in the hills. After prolonging knocking Mrs. Hunt came snarling to the door to inform me that her son hadn't returned and she didn't know when if ever he would. Profanely she told me to quit bothering her and slammed the door in my face.

I didn't have a TV set in my apartment. Sunday I came down to the office and watched the Dodgers win the fourth game.

Monday morning I got a call from a woman who had just left her husband. She was staying with her sister and wanted to return home for her clothes, but she was afraid of her husband and wanted some muscle along. It was the sort of job I ordinarily shied away from. Acting as a buffer between a feuding husband and wife was a good way to get your head taken off, but I was in just the right mood. I hoped he would give me trouble.

There was no trouble. The husband was parked before the TV with a beer, watching Sandy the Dandy pitch a shutout. I drank a beer with him and watched one and a half innings while the wife packed. During a commercial the husband told me he was glad to be rid of her. She was so burned at me by the time we left she refused to pay me. It served me right.

That night I parked up the street from the Hunt home and waited three hours. Nobody came kiting up on a motorcycle.

Tuesday was a Series off-day, with both teams going back to Minnesota for the sixth game. It was nearly noon when I entered Max's Bar.

"Hey, Mr. Hand! You were right. The Dodgers'll win it in four. One more to go tomorrow!" Max was as jubilant as a kid. "Too bad you had to work. Those seats your wife had were ringside."

"Glad you enjoyed it. And it's ex-wife, not wife."

He waved a magnanimous hand. "Same difference." Suddenly he was glowering at me. "That's a real lady, Miss Diana. You should be ashamed, leaving her."

"So I'm ashamed." I turned to go.

"Some broad named Reba Bright's been calling you. She sounds upset."

I didn't return her call. I knew what she wanted. In my office I made a quick call to Ernie downtown. Then I drove over to the liquor store.

Reba Bright and her husband were in the store. She started in on me at once. "Mr. Hand, it's been nearly a week now and I haven't heard a word from you as to what progress you've made. If any."

"Mrs. Bright, I don't make daily reports. And I am making progress . . ."

"Then you know who killed Tab?" On the counter her long fingers curled and uncurled. "Who is he?"

"I didn't say I knew. But I have uncovered a likely suspect. I haven't been able to run him to earth yet. I'd like Mr. Bright to come downtown with me. I have permission to show him through the police mug book. Maybe he can identify our boy . . ."

"Ralph?" It wasn't a question so much as a command.

Ralph Bright sighed, got into his jacket and went out to the car with me. On the way downtown I asked, "Been married long, Mr. Bright?"

"Five years."

"Wife had the dog all that time?"

His face took on a pinched look. "She bought Tab three years ago. Since then . . ."

He didn't continue, and I didn't press him. I had a far idea as to what he had started to say. I felt sorry for the guy. Being married to a woman like Reba Bright would be bad enough but having to compete with a dog must have been a bitch.

He picked Rod Hunt first off, placing a trembling finger on the photo. "That's him! That's the punk!"

Rod Hunt was thin-faced, with popping eyes, unruly red hair and a beard like an artist's charcoal strokes.

So now we had the culprit nailed. I should have gone to Ernie, told him everything and let the Department broadcast an all points pickup on Hunt.

I should have, but I didn't.

I delivered Bright back to the liquor store and returned to the hillside address. I didn't bother the mother again, but I did ask a few questions of the neighbors. I learned that Rod Hunt wasn't popular. When home he roared up and down the street on the cycle, endangering children. I spent the afternoon and part of the evening parked up the street.

Rod Hunt didn't come home.

The next day and evening I re-

peated the routine. He had to show sometime. According to Bright he'd only gotten thirty-some dollars in the holdup. That couldn't last him forever.

I listened to the sixth game on the car radio. The Dodgers and Claude Osteen lost. So much for Max's prognosticating.

It was around nine when I got to the office the next morning. I pushed the door open and went in. And the ceiling fell on me. Pain burst in my skull like a bomb. Falling, I could see the floor coming up to meet me. At the last moment I turned my face aside and saved myself a broken nose.

I don't think I was out for more than a minute or two. The first thing I heard were voices, reaching me as though through a long tunnel.

There were two voices, one male, one female. They kept running together, and I had to concentrate hard to keep them separated.

His: ". . . should kick his head in . . ."

Hers: "No, Rod! We're in enough trouble already!"

His: "What trouble, chick? We're in no trouble he didn't start, stinking private cop!"

Hers: "You came here to find out what he's after. What can you find out if you . . ."

His: "I came here to tell him to back off. What do I care what he's after? Scaring poor Mom to death. I owe him a kick in the head for that."

I opened my eyes at the sound of a foot scuffling the carpet. Inches in front of my face were a pair of black, highly-polished boots. One was being drawn back. I didn't know if he really intended to kick me. I didn't want to find out.

I brought both arms up fast, got both hands around one ankle and heaved. He yelped like a woman and went down, arms windmilling, landing on his rear with a thump. I climbed to my feet. My head felt like a scraped nerve. The girl was a dishwater blonde, with blue eyes round with fright. She was in faded jeans, a man's shirt, and wore boots to match her friend's.

I turned my attention back to the redhead just in time. He had regained his feet and was coming toward me in a crouch. Somewhere he had picked up a little judo; he was coming in low for a hip throw. He feinted. When I didn't bite, he came in fast, screaming the *keeji*. This is supposed to startle an opponent. His *keeji* was about as frightening as a cricket's chirp.

He seized my wrist and turned at the last second, his buttocks hitting my right thigh. Instead of resisting I went with his throw, over-balancing him. In falling I tore my wrist out of his grasp and clamped my hand around his forearm. We rolled together across the floor. I got my feet under me and heaved, doubling his arm behind his back and hauling him up with me. I spun around and slammed him down hard into the chair before my desk.

"Now you sit there, punk, or I'll tear your head off."

He tensed, lips peeling back, glaring at me. I waited. Then his fury leaked out of him like escaping air and he slumped back.

I caught a movement out of the corner of one eye and whirled to catch the girl as she fled toward the door. She kicked and quealed, pummeling my chest with tiny fists. I picked her up and planted her on one end of the desk, then backed warily toward the door. It was the old-fashioned type that can be locked with a key from either side. I locked it and dropped the key into my pocket. I perched on the end of the desk away from the girl. "Now we'll talk."

The boy aimed a weak sneer at me. "What's to talk? You're not so smart for a private eye . . ."

I said wearily, "I'm not a private eye."

". . . feeding Mom all that jazz about being from an insurance company! You know how I knew that was bull? Because I don't carry any insurance!"

"That makes you real smart, doesn't it? About as smart as holding up that liquor store and shooting the dog."

"What liquor store? What dog? Man, you're really full of it!"

I told him what liquor store and what dog.

"Man, you have to be out of your skull! I remember that place, sure. I went in there for some beer while Ellie waited outside. But no stickup. No shooting any damn dog. Man, something's real weird here."

"Come off it, Rod. The liquor store owner identified you in the mug book downtown."

"I don't care what rat fink identified who! Like the politicos say, this is strictly Smearsville!"

"All right, Rod. I think it's time we had some law in this thing."

I half-turned to pick up the phone. That was my biggest mistake of the day. This time the whole building fell on me.

When I came to, I was on the floor again and the first thing I saw were another pair of feet. This time the feet belonged to Max. He knelt beside me, helped me to sit up.

"Are you all right, Mr. Hand?"

"Don't ask. Just don't ask." I was afraid to touch the back of my head, afraid my fingers would sink out of sight into the brain pan. By Max's foot I saw the heavy ashtray from my desk. There was no blood on it but from the way I felt it was quite possible I didn't have any.

"I heard all the thumping from downstairs," Max said. "On the way up I met a boy and girl scooting down. Were they . . .?"

"They were."

He chuckled. "I'd've thought you could handle a punk like him."

"It wasn't the punk. It was the girl. I turned my back on her."

"Oh, well, that explains it. There's nothing deadlier than a broad you turn your back on."

With that somewhat scrambled aphorism resounding in my throbbing head, I hustled him out. I went across the hall to the bathroom and let cold water run on my head for a long time. It didn't help a hell of a lot.

Back in the office, I got Ernie on the phone. He listened to what I had to say, then spent ten minutes chewing me out good. Withholding evidence, not cooperating with the police, et cetera, et cetera. Finally he promised to get out a pickup on Rod Hunt and friend.

I got in my car and drove over to the liquor store.

Both Brights were there.

"I had a talk with the boy you identified, Mr. Bright. The police have a pickup out on him."

The woman's face lit up. "I hope he resists arrest and they have to shoot him down like he shot Tab!"

Ralph Bright didn't seem overjoyed. "You say you talked to him . . . Did he admit it?"

"No. He denied everything."

"Naturally he would. They always do."

Casually I had worked my way around and behind the short counter. "Tell me something, Mr. Bright . . . Did you like your wife's dog?"

His eyes widened. "Like Tab? What kind of a question is that?"

Reba Bright said, "Ralph hated Tab." She laughed shortly. "What's more, he was scared to death of him. I think he's glad Tab was killed."

"Now Reba, that's just not so!"

"Don't argue with me, Ralph." She waved a hand at him as though batting at a hovering insect. "I know what I know."

I had maneuvered until I was between them and directly behind the cash register. "Do you keep a gun in the store, Mr. Bright?"

"A gun! Of course not!"

I stooped down and began pawing through the stacks of paper bags under the counter.

"Here! What do you think you're doing?"

Bright began alternately pushing and tugging at me. I fended him off with one hand and continued the search with the other. Then I found it, in a corner underneath a pile of crumpled-up sacks.

A gun. A snub-nosed automatic.

God knows why he hadn't gotten rid of it. Probably because he didn't know what to do with it.

Reba Bright said, "A gun! Ralph, when did you get a gun?"

The man refused to look at either of us. "A couple of weeks ago. I thought it might be a good thing to have around the store."

"Without telling me? And the police asked if you had a gun on the premises. You said no."

"I was afraid they'd ask why I didn't use it."

I said, "I think you did use it. I think you bought it and waited for a chance to fake a holdup. I'm sure the bullet in the wall will match up with the gun." I glanced at the wall

where the bullet had dodged. The hole was newly plastered. "I see . . . The bullet in your wife's dog then."

Reba Bright spoke from behind me. "Ralph, did you shoot Tab?"

The man stood with his shoulders slumped, staring at the floor.

She thundered, "Ralph, answer me!"

His head came up. His face set in defiance. Even so, I think he answered more out of habit than anything. "Yes, Reba, I killed him! Since that dog came, I might as well have been a poor relation. You thought more of that dog than you did of me."

"You're right about that, Ralph. I thought more of Tab than I did of you. He was all male and proud of it." Her voice was soft, even gentle.

Everything happened very fast then. I was still standing with my back to her, the hand holding the gun relaxed at my side. Her hand closed around the gun, wrenched it from me. At the same time she drove a shoulder into my back. It was like being rammed by a truck. I hit the shelves with enough force to send bottles flying like tenpins. Before I could regain my balance, the gun roared twice.

By the time I could face around, it was all over. The bullets had slammed Ralph Bright up against the counter. Now he bent forward at the waist, politely, and fell, curling into the fetal position.

"Yes, Ralph," she said dully, I thought far more of Tab."

She offered no resistance when I took the gun from her. I took it by the barrel, wrapped my handkerchief around it and dropped it carefully into my coat pocket. Her face could have been carved out of ivory for all the emotion it showed.

There was little doubt in my mind that he was dead, but I knelt to make sure. Then I went to the pay phone on the wall and called Ernie.

An hour later I pulled up before Max's Bar. I felt bone-tired and old; the taste of ashes filled my mouth. I pushed the door open and went in. The place was bedlam.

The ball game. I had forgotten all about the last game of the Series.

Max saw me and hurried over, beaming. "It's the eighth inning, Mr. Hand, and we've got it sewed up. Sandy's pitching another dandy." He hooked his arm in mine. "Come along, Mr. Hand, somebody's here."

I went along docilely. He led me to a booth halfway back.

And there was Diana. She glanced away from the TV set as we stopped before the booth. Her blonde hair was in disarray, her lovely face flushed, her jade-green eyes aglow.

Max murmured in my ear, "I'll bring you a brew," and went away.

Diana said gravely, "Your Dodgers have the Series won, Jerry."

"That's good," I said without too much interest. I slid into the booth.

"How have you been, Jerry?"

"It'll take awhile to tell you."

Her sudden smile was shy. "I have all the time in the world."

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FAIR GAME

The sweat scalded his eyes and blurred his vision. It was his manhood under fire, not the kudu. He gritted his teeth and squeezed the trigger.

BY ROSWELL B. ROHDE

"SHOOT!" Marion whispered.

"Now!" breathed Heywood.

The bearers were back of the ridge, so they couldn't see what was going on, but the two trackers lay motionless in the grass and looked at him imploringly, their mouths half-open, wanting, not daring, to speak.

Jim Thompson shook his head a little, trying to clear his eyes. Sweat ran into them, scalding salt sweat, making them water and throwing them out of focus. How in hell could a man shoot when he couldn't see? He was perfectly calm, but he couldn't see. The kudu were just dark blurs half-way up the opposite side of the ravine, near the edge of trees.

Jim shut his eyes tight, trying to squeeze the sweat from them, and when he opened them he could make out the kudu more distinctly. He still couldn't distinguish which was the bull, but he knew he had to shoot because Heywood and Marion expected him to. He knew, too, that they expected him to miss, so he shut his eyes again hard, opened them, and concentrated on the largest of the animals. As he tightened his finger gently on the trigger, he heard Heywood's whispered:

"Shoot!" and his added underbreath: "—Fool!"

The roar of the big gun was not as annoying to Jim today as it had been yesterday, when it seemed it must burst his head. He took it as a good omen, that he was getting his nerves under control. He had hunted plenty in the States, but out here it was different. Yet Africa wasn't so much different that he should muff a dozen shots in as many days.

It was, he decided now, his white hunter's damned superior, supercilious smile that threw him off. The way Heywood looked after he'd shot and missed; his confounded "I told you so!" expression. Nothing said—just that bastardly look. That was what bitched him, fouled up his shots.

He didn't want it to happen in

front of Marion, but she insisted on coming out with them, even though she wouldn't touch a gun herself. It was as though he were her hair shirt and she must be constantly where he was, so that he might irk her, show himself off as stupid and a rotten shot before Heywood. He'd seen the look of sympathy—a superior sort, it was true, but sympathy nonetheless—which Heywood gave Marion, and it was a hell of a thing on your honeymoon.

The two trackers were on their feet, shouting "Piga! Piga!" and hugging each other, or rather, the young impressionable Moko was trying to hug the old, experienced, cynical gray-headed one whose name Jim couldn't pronounce, but who pushed Moko away in disgust.

Marion was patting her husband on the back enthusiastically, but out of the corner of his eye Jim could see Heywood, a slow smile twitching the corners of his mouth.

"One down," the white hunter said. "I'll go ahead and see what's what."

"Bull—big bull!" Moko shouted.

"Shut up," Jim said, and turned abruptly to Heywood.

"I'll go over. I shot it—I can see if it's dead or not."

He was oddly angered that Heywood should think he had to go first. He knew a wounded kudu might be dangerous, but he resented the implication that he would be unable to deal with it. Heywood might just as well have said:

"Look here, old boy, you've made a lucky hit, finally, but it may get a bit dangerous from here on in and we can't depend on you in a pinch."

Heywood's eyebrows that worked in conjunction with his smile went up ever so slightly, but he said only:

"Come along if you like. Walk to my left. Check your gun, please. . . ."

Jim grunted and together they made their way down the sloping side of the ravine, crossed a dried-up stream bed at the bottom, and struck obliquely up the opposite side. And all the while the tsetse flies ate on his neck.

The trackers and Marion, backed up by the bearers followed at a little distance, as though respectfully. Once Heywood motioned them back, but when they were a hundred yards behind, he let them come.

There were reeds at the bottom of the ravine, dried, burned and dead, with serrated edges that tore at their clothes. It was impossible to move through them without making a noise, but the rest of the herd had vanished at the shot, so there was nothing to worry about, nothing to think about, even, except the one he'd shot. They reached the edge of reed-growth, passed on through dry grass, the field opening up before them.

Jim thought how it had been, how, after he'd squeezed off, the dull thud of the bullet finding the kudu had come back to them, and how the animal had seemed to get

larger in his 'scope as it leaped. A plunge, a rearing, leaping lunge, and then it had been down, out of sight. It hadn't gotten to its feet afterward, so apparently he'd hit where he'd tried to aim, just behind the shoulder. It has been a standing shot, so there was no excuse for a gut-shot, none whatever.

They came up the slope, Heywood walking easily, gun at ready. He seemed tireless; around camp he was restless, as though his energies were only half-expended. Jim, when he thought about him at all, without thinking only of his superior smile, decided perhaps it was because he had no wife, no ties, and was therefore, theoretically unsettled. Which was silly, really, because plenty of men never marry. And Heywood had women; it was written on him plainly, in his face, in the knowing, half-contemptuous eyes.

Jim hadn't liked the way he'd looked Marion up and down when they were introduced at Tuami. It had been an odd sort of look, insultingly searching, just as the one he gave Jim had been filled with patronizing tolerance, sizing him up in relation to his wife, and—for all Jim knew—finding him wanting.

Heywood hadn't gotten any more human on safari—more distant if anything, tightening up a little each time Jim missed a shot, making him uncomfortable so he *did* miss often.

Jim discovered now that despite his eagerness to see the kudu, his legs ached and the insect bites on his face and neck irked him, grew chafed with sweat. They came over a little rise, Heywood striding easily, as though he had been walking down hill, not up, and Jim, puffing hard, feeling choked up and out of condition which shouldn't have been because he always kept himself fit and two weeks out here ought to have toughened him more.

They each held their guns ready, but Heywood saw the animal first and his smile began slowly at the corners of his mouth. Jim was disgusted with himself and angry that he should even have noticed this at a time when he thought he had been concentrating his full attention on the kudu.

"Congratulations," Heywood said dryly. "It's a fine kudu—even if it is a cow!"

Jim was too furious to speak. It would have been better to have missed entirely. But to kill a cow—that made him look a complete fool. He couldn't very well explain that he couldn't see because of the sweat in his eyes, or because of aversion to the man whose respect he thought he needed. He couldn't say he'd shot at the bull and killed a cow yards away—that would be an admission of total ineptitude.

No, he'd have to pass it off as best he could. He'd *thought* he was shooting a bull; that was virtually the truth.

The others came up and Moko said something and laughed. Jim

couldn't understand what it was, but he didn't like it. Heywood spoke a curt word in Swahili which seemed to be the equivalent of "Shut up!" and the grin died on Moko's face.

Heywood turned to the bearers and gave them rapid instructions. They went to work on the carcass at once, and the three turned away and walked down the ravine slowly.

"Camp meat," Heywood said. "Very good, especially the liver, charred over the fire. You'll see tonight."

Jim knew they didn't need camp meat, and the bearers and trackers—hell, everyone knew it! Heywood had killed an eland only this morning.

The look of commiseration on Marion's face was agonizing to Jim. He checked his gun, pausing to wipe the 'scope with a bit of soft cloth from his pocket.

"I think," Heywood was saying, "I'd put a handkerchief under my hat brim next time. Sweat can run into your eyes . . ."

Damn him! Jim thought. Giving me an out after he's bitched my shooting! Bitched the whole damned party, for that matter. . . .

In the next week Jim Thompson made a couple of good shots, and a number of bad ones. He took Marion's lavish praise of the good ones in stony silence; Heywood's occasional words of encouragement he considered insults. Hell—back in the States he'd been a good shot—probably a better one than Heywood. Well, he'd show them, he'd get a rhino with one shot, a well-placed shot that even Heywood would see was no accident!

Now, watching the beetle-like movements of a pair of the creatures through the binoculars, he wasn't so sure of himself. They looked like miniature tanks—standing with ponderous dignity, or running with queer, jerky movements—never walking.

He found he had difficulty concentrating on the animals, even. He'd felt it coming for days now, almost since they'd picked up Heywood in Tuami. That gradual cooling of Marion's ardor, that insidious dissatisfaction that was forming a barrier between them; those occasional times when he'd caught Marion studying him as though he were a stranger. And those glances, worse still, which she and Heywood exchanged now and then. Not the glowing, bright-eyed looks of lovers, but ones assuredly indicative of understanding, and, unless Jim was way off—which he could be because he was infernally jealous—mutual admiration. It was the quiet sort of thing that starts where there has been no intention that it should start, and grows slowly, without forcing. It was pure hell for Jim, because he loved his wife. Theirs had been no whirlwind affair, but one in which they'd both been very sure. Now, damn it, because of a few bad

shots and a supercilious smile, Jim could feel a barrier rising between them.

He was angry, and it was the rage of impotence. He'd never known anyone like Heywood, so how could he fight this thing?

"The bigger one," Heywood was saying, almost in his ear, still watching the rhinos through his glasses, "has an extraordinary horn. Let's work down this slope to that ridge there and I think we'll be in range."

The wind was right and they were concealed by the ridge. For a moment Jim felt that this was to be his time and he would shoot straight and true and kill well, but a little later, partially concealed by the ridge, seeing the rhinos in 'scope range, his confidence ebbed from him.

They found positions behind a thicket of short bushes and a thorn tree had died there and toppled part way over, and Jim raised his gun and sighted through the branches. He could feel the sweat start on his forehead, and he squatted down and took out a cloth and put it across under the front of his hat, feeling self-conscious and a trifle silly. Then he raised himself and sighted once more.

"Better rest it on the tree," Heywood advised, almost at his elbow. He had not even taken down his binoculars, but was still studying the rhinos. He had simply assumed that Jim had not thought of the tree as a gun-rest.

Jim grunted. His dislike for Heywood was rapidly fanning into outright hatred. Yesterday the white hunter had stayed in camp and sent him out with the trackers alone. When he'd returned, earlier than they probably expected him, Jim had found Marion and Heywood sitting side by side on folding chairs near her tent. Heywood had dropped her hand when they came over the rise, but not quickly enough. Jim had seen.

He'd said nothing to Marion. He was too torn up inside to even intimate that he knew what was happening. Only he'd mentioned casually when they were eating last night, that after today they'd be starting back. He'd thought she had looked surprised and Heywood a little annoyed. Afterward she and Heywood had been in earnest conversation, standing very close together in the shadow of a tent flap. He had little difficulty imagining that his remark about starting back ahead of schedule had stirred them.

Now, because Heywood suggested he rest the heavy gun on the tree, which was the sensible thing to do if it were solid, of course, Jim held it in his arms, sighted the biggest rhino, felt himself bitched, unable to shoot, unable to aim the gun at all, then, forcing himself to be cool, forcing a tense sort of steadiness into his arms which the .470 was making ache fiercely, caught the rhino in the 'scope, sighted just behind his foreleg, moved his aim

slightly forward, then back, as the rhino stood motionless, head heavy with horn raised and a little away from them sniffing the air, and squeezed off the shot. The thud of the bullet tearing into the tough hide came up distinctly.

The rhino fell, rolling forward as it went down, looking awkward, jerky, even in its fall. There was a shout from the trackers and bearers who had ranged themselves back on the ridge where they had first sighted the animals.

But the shout died in their throats. The rhino was up again and plowed out of sight into the reeds and tangled grass that hid the shallow creek for most of its course here.

Jim cursed. He could not bring himself to look at Marion or Heywood. He'd been bitched again, just when he'd figured the spell might be broken. The way the rhino went down, you'd have thought he was down for good. . . .

"Well," Heywood was saying, and Jim, without seeing, could imagine his superior smile beginning to come again after what had probably been a very bad moment, "you hit him. Solid, from the sound. But it must have been ribs, because he was using all four legs afterward . . ."

"Where did you expect me to find his heart?" Jim said savagely, and caught a glimpse of Marion's face, white beneath her tan, just beyond Heywood's shoulder. "In his horn? You sound as though you had to break their legs to kill 'em!"

Heywood did not seem even mildly annoyed. He was already giving instructions to the bearers and telling the trackers what came next. They all spread out along the lower of the two ridges and began to move cautiously forward upstream, but a hundred yards or so above the creek. That way they could see if the rhino broke from cover, might later urge him out, if he had not died by the stream.

"I'll have to go in after him," Heywood said cheerfully. "It must have been a gut-shot, after all . . ."

"Gut-shot, hell!" Jim said, moving forward, his hand tightening on his gun. "He probably hasn't gone a dozen yards up that creek. I hit him all right!"

"I saw it through the glasses," Marion said, and Jim realized that there was a new, quiet admiration in her voice and it made him reckless. "You hit him hard!"

"You couldn't tell how hard," Heywood said, "even with glasses. But it was a fine horn—we'll have to see what's become of it."

Jim had already started down the slope toward the spot where the rhino had taken its nose-dive and then scrambled out of sight, but Heywood overtook him in a dozen strides.

"You take the trail on the left bank," he said. "I'll go up the creek if the bottom is hard. He'll be close to the water."

"I'll take the creek," Jim said stubbornly. "It's my rhino."

Heywood opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again to say:

"Suit yourself, Thompson. If you want to make Marion a widow, you couldn't pick a better way. If he charges, you may get one shot. That horn will be the biggest thing you see, and hitting it won't stop him."

"I may not hit him at all," Jim said as they started in among reeds that were over their heads. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? And my wife is Mrs. Thompson to you, Heywood. Try to remember that, will you?"

Heywood looked across at him from the matted animal trail along the creek bank, and the corners of his mouth gradually formed into the supercilious smile that Jim had come to hate. Jim was vaguely aware that Marion was calling to him with real concern, telling him to be careful, but his mind was on that smile and how much he hated it.

"I think," Heywood said contemptuously, "that what I call her is up to her, don't you?"

Jim's answer, whatever it might have been, was lost forever in the moments that followed. The rhino came then, with a rush, his movement smoothed by his momentum. He was broadside to Jim, on the animal trail, and he came straight at the white hunter, a bleeding fury, wound-mad.

Each man snapped one shot. Heywood's was deflected by the horn and went whining into the brush. Jim was surprised at his coolness as he swung the gun and point-aimed it, not having time to sight. He remembered how it had been with Marion before Heywood and knew that it was going to be that way, and better, now. He realized, too, that Heywood had ordered him to almost certain death, and only anger and possibly instinct had saved him.

Yet, knowing all this, he shot as quickly as he could. His bullet exploded in the rhino's heart. It was a truly excellent shot and he was sorry that the momentum of the animal made it impossible for Heywood ever to know how good it had been.

It started with a Hindu dancer and a lawyer. When they met, the Hindu dancer's heartbeat stopped permanently and the lawyer's temporarily. I did not know the Hindu dancer at all, but I knew the lawyer well enough. He's me, Scott Jordan.

The event was a memorable one. It led to a small brunette and a large swindle. Both were beauties. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was Thursday morning, 2:30 A.M., when I came awake sharply and irritably at the insistent ringing of my doorbell. I muttered thickly into the pillow and tried to ignore it, but the bell kept going, so I got up and shuffled blindly into the foyer. A summons at that hour usually means trouble. Still, I couldn't help myself. In some ways a lawyer is like a doctor. Sickness and crime work on a twenty-four hour shift right around the clock.

I opened the door and there he was, brightly festooned in the costume of an Oriental potentate, with

Right, of course. Scott Jordan was neither jury nor executioner. The tightness ebbed out of him. "Okay," he said. "Call Headquarters."

INDIAN GIVER

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY HAROLD Q. MASUR

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a jeweled turban wrapped around his head. At first I didn't see him. He was on his knees, bent over, his forehead touching the floor in an attitude of prayer.

I knew if I touched him he would topple sideways. I knew it because the knife sticking out of his back had been planted in exactly the right spot. But he toppled anyway, listing to port slowly and then rolling over with a soft thud.

I stood in the doorway, impaled, heartbeat suspended.

His lips were frozen in a twisted grimace, and lidless eyes stared upward in a kind of perpetual astonishment. He was young, about twenty-five, his face darkly smeared with theatrical makeup. I didn't know the fellow from a hitching post.

Good-bye rest. No more sleep for me tonight. I could, of course, haul him down the corridor and deposit him in front of somebody else's door. But I'm in the business. I know better. Transporting a homicide victim carries stiff penalties, and besides, this chap had been scratched out on his way to see me and I wanted to know the reason why.

I sighed with resignation and headed for the telephone.

I can recall the next two hours as a montage of frenetic activity. City employees came, performed their chores with calculated efficiency and departed. Homicide detectives of all shapes and sizes kept firing questions at me, but through it all I maintained complete innocence. The corpse was finally removed and at last I stood alone with Lieutenant John Nola.

The lieutenant was a neat, dark, sober, slender man, with brooding eyes and a searching brain, tough but human, and absolutely incorruptible. He was studying me carefully. "Hope you're not trying to promote something, counselor," he said.

I gave him an aggrieved look. "Haven't I always been on the level with you, John?"

"Up to a point, yes. But I'd hate to think you were pulling a fast one now."

If he ever did it would be curtains. Five years of friendship would go out the window. He lit one of his thin, dappled cigars and inhaled thoughtfully. I knew that he had established the victim's identity and asked him about it.

He said, "The boy's name was Eddie Lang. Made his living as a Hindu dancer in night clubs and television spots. Curent booking at *The Kismet,* 52nd Street. According to the M.E. he was ambushed as he stepped out of the elevator and barely made it to your door." Nola searched for an ash tray. His habits were meticulous. "Know many people in show business?" he asked me offhandedly.

"A few. Eddie Lang wasn't one of them. Why?"

"Because he was on his way to see you. Probably recommended."

I shrugged helplessly. "Have you checked his living quarters?"

"The boys are there now."

"How about the knife?"

"Not even fingerprints. You saw the type. Cutlery stores all over the city sell them in sets." He rubbed his forehead. "Eddie Lang knew something and that knowledge killed him. Somebody had to put him in cold storage before he could talk."

He stopped as the telephone rang and got the handset to his ear. He grunted into the mouthpiece and gave a nod of satisfaction.

"Hold her there," he said crisply. "I'll be right down." He hung up and regained his feet. His eyes met mine. "Gladys Monroe—ever hear the name?"

I thought and shook my head. "Who is she?"

"Eddie Lang's dancing partner. Sergeant Wienick just picked her up at the Hotel Buxton. She's down at Headquarters now. Like to sit in?"

The idea appealed to me, but I shook my head. "Got a case on the calendar tomorrow morning at ten. I won't be able to think straight if I don't get some sleep. Suppose I contact you later?"

He nodded and left.

I saw no profit in a safari to Headquarters at this hour. I didn't even have a client, but the city was paying Nola. I went back to bed, but I didn't get any sleep. The event was too recent, the memory too fresh. I couldn't relax. How insensitive would a man have to be to accept the fact of homicide at his doorstep with equanimity? So I sat up and smoked and rummaged through my memory. Eddie Lang rang no bell.

Dawn was a soiled gray smudge when I wandered swollen-eyed into the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee that was blacker than sin and thick enough to walk on. When the pot was empty I got dressed and went down and headed, without conscious volition, to the Buxton.

It was an ancient hotel, clinging to its air of reserve and quiet respectability. The lobby was deserted. I sat down at a writing desk and scribbled *Gladys Monroe* across an envelope. I took it over to the desk and handed it to the clerk. He glanced at the name and shoved the envelope into Box 520.

I was on my way to the elevator before he turned around. The operator was half asleep and manipulated the contraption by instinct. I debarked on the fifth floor, found the girl's door, and knocked.

Apparently she was awake, for she answered at once. "Who is it?" But the voice was small and unsteady.

"A friend of Eddie's," I said.

The door opened and I saw a girl who would have rated high on anybody's list of prospective brides. Small and trim, with luminous eyes in a pale oval face. Right now the eyes were miserable and the face woebegone, yet a wistful, appealing quality came right out at you. The high cheekbones were streaked with

moisture, and she wrinkled up her forehead, trying to remember me.

"May I come in, Gladys?" I said.

"But I . . ."

"The name is Jordan—Scott Jordan."

Slim articulate fingers flashed to her mouth. She spoke breathlessly between them. "You're the lawyer Eddie went to see. Where he died. The police told me."

I nodded gravely.

She sized me up, relying on her intuition, then stepped aside. The room was small, its dominant feature a gorgeously spangled Oriental costume hanging from a hinge on the closet door. She let me have the single straight-backed chair and perched herself on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry to bother you like this," I said. "The police give you a rough time?"

She managed a tremulous smile. "Not too bad."

"I imagine you're weary of questions about Eddie," I said. "So I won't keep you long. He was on his way to see me and killed before he could talk. It's been on my mind. I haven't been able to sleep. Clues in a murder case cool off fast and I didn't want to waste time. Will you tell me about Eddie? Some seemingly unimportant detail may have more significance for me than it did for the police."

She nodded. "I don't mind. I met Eddie several years ago at a rehearsal hall. I liked his style of dancing and his ideas and I decided to team up with him. We got along fine. He was clever and he taught me a lot. He designed the choreography for our act and handled the business too. Got us most of the bookings. I . . . I'll be lost without him."

"Were you very close?"

"He wasn't my boy friend, if that's what you mean."

Glad to hear it, I almost said, but held my tongue. "Ever hear him mention my name?"

"No. Not that I can recall."

"Enemies?"

"Not one. Everybody liked him."

"How about his family, his background?"

"I don't think—wait a minute." Her expression changed. "I remember something. Eddie was sitting in my dressing room between numbers yesterday, reading a newspaper, the *Herald Tribune,* I think, and suddenly he gave an exclamation. 'Look who's in town!' He seemed excited. I asked who and he said, 'Malcolm Parish of the Parish Shipping Lines.'" She stopped short. "What is it, Mr. Jordan? Is something wrong?"

"No," I said. "Go ahead."

"I'd never heard Eddie mention the man and I asked about him. He said his uncle Victor had met Mr. Parish in Switzerland about fifteen years ago and had become his traveling companion and secretary. They went all over Europe. Eddie said his uncle used to write once in a while,

but he hadn't heard from him in over a year. According to the paper, Mr. Parish was staying at the Waldorf, and Eddie said he was going to call him and find out if his uncle had come back too."

"Had he?"

"I don't know. Eddie left and after that we had to do our number."

"But you saw him later. What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything only that he was going over to the Waldorf. We usually stop off for coffee after the last show, but Eddie excused himself and went out alone. That was the last time I saw him." Her mouth was thin and hurt.

I was silent for a moment. "Can you do the act alone?"

"With changes perhaps. I'll try it tonight."

"May I come and watch?"

She looked at me seriously. "I think I'd like that."

I had my link now, though I didn't know what it meant. I had recently handled a matter for the Parish Shipping Lines that had received considerable publicity. The company's chief stockholder, inactive in the business, was something of an enigma. On my way to the Waldorf I mulled over some of the facts and rumors I'd heard about him.

Malcolm Parish had inherited his interest from his grandfather, the company's founder, twenty years ago. At that time, Malcolm was forty years of age, and the older man had had ample opportunity to evaluate his grandson's business acumen and administrative ability. Having reached the conclusion that these qualities were non-existent he prudently arranged to put his holdings into a trust and leave the firm's management in more capable hands. These measures proved to be both timely and expedient. He passed on soon afterward and Malcolm wasted no time in confirming his grandfather's judgment.

He took his insensitive soul to Europe and devoted himself to the nomadic life of a luxurious wanderer. Europe and the Far East had traditions and culture which he felt were sadly lacking in his native America. But never once, during twenty years of expatriation, did he fail to cash those nasty materialistic checks supplied by American enterprise.

Now, apparently, travel had lost its allure. He was back home—if the impersonal accommodations of a hotel can be called home.

His suite was in the tower, sufficiently opulent but lacking warmth. I had identified myself on the house phone and he consented to see me. He came affably to the door, a slightly built man with mild eyes and a firm handshake. He had reddish hair and a neatly trimmed imperial of the same color.

"Glad to meet you, counselor," he said, convoying me to a chair with a companionable hand on my shoul-

der. "Read about you in the morning paper. Frightful experience, I gather. Gave me something of a shock, too. Why, I spoke to that man myself only yesterday. Liked him on sight. Very decent sort. Good manners, forthright. Came to inquire about his uncle who used to work for me. What do you drink? Brandy? Scotch? Absinthe? Call down for anything you like. Take only a moment."

"Nothing, thank you," I said.

"Smoke? Here, try one of these. Made especially for me in Cuba." He shoved a box of long Havana fillers under my nose. They were fragrant and fresh. "Take a couple, counselor. Go ahead. Help yourself."

I selected one and put it in my pocket. He took one for himself, trimmed the end, and got it ignited. Smoke poured luxuriously from his nostrils.

I said, "The police are checking Eddie Lang's movements. Have you notified them he was here?"

Expensive dental work appeared in a lame smile. "Quite frankly, I did not. I saw no connection between the two events." A slight frown drew his eyebrows together. "Incidentally, Mr. Jordan, what brought you to me? How did you know Eddie Lang was here?"

I told him and asked, "What news did you give him about his uncle?"

The bearded face went long and solemn. "I told him that Victor was dead."

"Dead?"

"Quite." Malcolm Parish nodded sadly. "Victor died about a year ago. We had just taken a trip to Italy, flew over the Alps. It may have been the altitude, I don't know. Victor's heart was never strong. He suffered a severe thrombosis shortly after we reached a small villa I had rented for the season, and he was gone in a matter of minutes. In the twinkling of an eye, you might say. Before I could summon a doctor."

I raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you notify anybody?"

"Of course, the local consul. Victor was buried in the town cemetery."

"I mean relatives."

"Well, now, the fact is I didn't even know Victor had relatives. He never mentioned his nephew and I didn't even know Eddie Lang existed. I was under the impression Victor was alone in the world." Parish shook his head mournfully. "Missed the man dreadfully at first. He ran my household efficiently and played chess like a master. Absolutely irreplaceable."

"How did Eddie take the news?"

"Rather badly, I'm afraid. He seemed genuinely affected. But he shook it off nicely and after a while we had a fine chat. He told me all about his work and that little girl, Gladys Monroe. Meant to catch his act this evening and take them out afterwards. I'd like to know who killed him. Any ideas?"

"Not yet. We're working on it."

He blew smoke at the ceiling. It

hung over his head in a disembodied cloud. "I understand you did some work recently for the Parish Lines, Mr. Jordan."

"It was more in the nature of an investigation," I told him.

"Investigation? Are you a detective, too?"

"Not officially, but I've had some luck in the field."

He sat up. "Well, now, I'm interested, counselor. What sort of an investigation?"

"Sorry. It was confidential."

He smiled patronizingly. "Come now. In a manner of speaking, you might say that I am the company, since I hold the largest block of stock."

"True." I smiled back. "But I was hired by the Board of Directors."

"Who, in the last analysis, represent me."

"Unquestionably. So I imagine they'd be glad to show you the files."

He coughed up smoke in a hearty laugh and slapped his knee. "I like that. I do indeed. It isn't often one meets a man of prudence and discretion. I like you, counselor. I like you very much." He closed his mouth and stared at me intently for a moment. "Are you still under retainer to the company?"

I shook my head.

"Would you care to represent me, personally?"

"To do what?"

"To help me accomplish what I came back to the States for."

"Which is?"

"Namely, to vacate the trust set up by my grandfather and have it declared a nullity." He struck his knee with a clenched fist. His lips were grim and his eyes glowing. "To wrest control of my own company from its present Board of Directors. To manage and pilot the destinies of the Parish Shipping Lines. I'm not at all pleased with the way things are going. We live in an expanding economy, Mr. Jordan, and the Parish Lines should have grown to twice its present size. Instead, the company is virtually at a standstill." His beard quivered with indignation. "The directors have been sitting on their rumps, riding the crest." The fist landed on his knee again. "I'm not going to stand by as an idle spectator and watch the company become atrophied. I'm going to take a hand."

He bounced out of his chair and went to a desk. He turned holding a checkbook in one hand and a ballpoint pen in the other. His jaw was set with determination.

"I need the services of a fighting lawyer, Jordan. I like the cut of your cloth. You look like a scrapper. Name your retainer. Go ahead. I won't haggle about the fee."

I sat blinking. His enthusiasm and eloquence surprised me. At last I said, "Ten thousand dollars," just to test his sincerity.

He wrote without batting a lash. He folded the check and tucked it into my pocket behind the display handkerchief.

I said cautiously, "Your grandfather's trust may be irrevocable. I can't promise a thing."

He waved it aside, his mouth obstinate. "Win or lose, my mind is made up. I'm going to the mat with those boys and I want you in my corner. What's ten thousand dollars? Peanuts, counselor. The company is worth millions."

This was the first time my services had been courted with such enthusiasm. "I'll be in touch with you, Mr. Parish," I said, rising. "As soon as I can read through the trust documents."

"Fine. Just remember, time is of the essence. We've got to start rolling."

After twenty years of indolence he was suddenly in a hurry.

I stopped off at a phone booth and arranged an adjournment of the case on this morning's calendar.

I placed Malcolm Parish's cigar on the desk in front of Lieutenant John Nola. He sniffed at it and raised an eyebrow at me. "What's this, a bribe?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to know if you've made any progress."

His face was lined and tired. "Very little."

"How about Gladys Monroe?"

"Business associate, that's all."

"I saw her this morning." He stared at me, and I went on telling him about Malcolm Parish.

He mulled it over. "What do you make of it?"

"I don't know, I said. "Yet. Did you check Eddie Lang's room?"

"With a magnifying glass. Combed the place thoroughly. No clues."

"Mind if I go over and take a look?"

"Why?" His inspection was critical. "You got better eyesight than we have?"

"No, John, I don't mean that at all, but I've been mixed up in a lot of matters and there's always a chance something may click. It can't hurt and it may do some good."

He deliberated briefly and then reached for an envelope, extracting a key which he tossed across the desk. "Here. Got it from the manager. It's a duplicate. Couldn't find Lang's key in his pocket." He paused and leveled a finger. "Report in full, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

I could feel his eyes following me through the door. The name stamped on the key was *Hotel Buxton*. I hailed a cab and sat back. I had a feeling that something was going to happen and as it turned out I was right.

When I crossed the Buxton's antique lobby I thought of Gladys sitting alone in her room. I controlled an impulse to visit her again and went on up to the seventh floor. I found Eddie Lang's room and used the key. I took one step and froze in the doorway, whistling.

It seemed, from the room's appearance, that the Police Academy

had omitted a course in neatness from its curriculum. The place was a mess. Drawers had been emptied out on the floor and Eddie's suits lay askew across the bed.

I started with the suits, turning all the pockets inside out. Nothing. Then I got down on my hands and knees and went poking through the piles of stuff on the floor. My fingers encountered something and pulled it clear. One of those correspondence portfolios in imitation leather, with compartments for stamps, paper, and envelopes. It contained several old letters, one from an agent offering a San Francisco booking, one from a high school girl who'd caught his act on TV and thought he was the best thing since Fred Astaire, and one postmarked Switzerland about a year ago and signed Uncle Victor.

I read the salutation and that's when I got it. His footsteps were silent coming up behind me. I never heard him. But I felt him all right. The blow landed with a shattering impact and what probably saved my life was the hat on my head. A streak of lightning seemed to explode through my brain. I grabbed for my head and the next blow almost broke my thumb. The sap was poised for its final benediction when I rolled over and it caught me on the shoulder, paralyzing my arm.

I was dimly conscious of harsh breathing and a flurry of activity. Then the door slammed. I tried to rise and was engulfed by a wave of nauseating dizziness. I lay still until it passed. Then I struggled upright and steadied myself against a chair. The closet door stood open. Three short steps had brought him close enough to strike. The letter I had started to read was gone.

I reached for the phone and called Nola. When he heard my voice he knew something was wrong and demanded sharply, "What's up, Scott?"

"Somebody conked me," I said shakily. "Damn near fractured my skull."

"Where are you?"

"In Eddie Lang's room."

"Did you see him?"

"No. He was hiding in the closet and came up behind me."

Nola muffled an oath. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. Listen, John, didn't your boys find a portfolio of letters belonging to Lang?"

"Found it myself. I was there."

"Why didn't you keep it?"

"Because it was old stuff. Innocuous. What's needling you, boy?"

"A letter from his uncle," I said, hollow-voiced. "It's gone. There was a clue in it somewhere."

"Don't guess, Scott. Be specific."

"I can't. I didn't read the letter. You did. Dig in, Lieutenant, please, and try to recall. What did it say?"

We had a bad connection. Static cracked softly over the wire. Finally his voice came: "Listen, Scott, that letter was written a year ago. The guy was a windbag, full

of fury, griping about his job and knocking European customs, their lack of efficiency. You know the type. A tongue-waver."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "I know the type. Talk to you, later, John. My head's splitting." I hung up.

Sure, I reflected grimly. The type is well known to me. Sometimes it's only talk and sometimes it's more than talk. They thought Hitler was nothing but a windbag too, until he gave the world twenty-four hours to get out.

People reveal themselves by what they say. A man's true stripe rides close to the tip of his tongue. And clues in a murder case can be found in character.

I turned towards the door and winced with pain. I removed my hat, gingerly exploring the wound. It was open and moist and needed attention. So I descended to the fifth floor and knocked on Gladys Monroe's door. She asked who it was. She opened at once when I identified myself, her face pleased and bright. One look was all she needed.

"Mr. Jordan!" she said in quickly rising alarm. "Are you ill?"

"Something fell on my head. Have you got a band-aid?"

She ran to the bathroom cabinet and came back. "Let me see." I turned and heard her gasp. "Something fell on your head? What was it, Rhode Island? You need a doctor, somebody with needle and thread. Look, Mr. Jordan—"

"Scott."

"Look Scott, I'm going to call—"

"Later," I said. "Emergency repairs will do for a while. I've got to see a man. It's urgent."

She said no more and went to work. Antiseptic was an applied flame. She pinched the wound together and covered it with a band-aid. "How do you feel?"

"Slightly used, but ready for action."

The phone rang and she reached for it. "Yes," she said, "this is Miss Monroe." Her eyes widened. "You're in the lobby now, Mr. Parish, and you'd like to see me?"

I caught her attention by chipping at the air. Tell him you're alone, I signalled, and willing to receive him. She took the cue without faltering and told him to come ahead. Then she turned to me in puzzlement.

"What's this all about, Scott?"

"No time for explanations now," I told her swiftly. "Just listen. Listen carefully. I want you to stretch the truth. Tell him Eddie often spoke about his Uncle Victor. Tell him you have a snapshot somewhere." I bent down and brushed her cheek lightly with my lips.

She blinked. "Who was that for?"

"Me."

"Then it's my turn now."

I swallowed an impulse to give her the chance and ducked toward the closet.

"What are you going to do?" she called nervously.

"Hide. I want to observe his reactions. Slow down, Gladys, and look natural." I left the closet door slightly ajar for visibility and ventilation.

Just in time. Almost at once there was a knock on the door. I was proud of Gladys. She handled the situation with bland innocence. "Mr. Parish, I'm delighted to meet you. Eddie mentioned your name only yesterday. Come in, please, won't you?"

He accepted the invitation, courtly and urbane, lips smiling over the red-tinted imperial. His clothes were fashionable, a shade too meticulous, and he carried a silver-knobbed walking stick with quite a bit of dash. He tucked it under his elbow and bowed from the waist. "A pleasure, Miss Monroe; a pleasure indeed."

The amenities over, he sat in the proffered chair and appraised her with a wandering and faintly lecherous eye. "Why, you're quite lovely," he remarked benignly.

"You sound surprised, Mr. Parish."

"Not surprised. Pleased. In fact, overwhelmed. I consider myself something of a connoisseur. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Please do."

He lit one of his fragrant cigars, savored it for a moment, and then inquired idly, "In what connection did Eddie mention my name, may I ask?"

"He read about your arrival in New York and he was very anxious to see you about his uncle."

"Ah, yes." The bearded face went long and solemn. "I feel badly about that. Can't forgive myself. Should have broken the news to him more gently. Didn't realize Victor was the only family Eddie had. The boy was badly shaken. I take it he's in the morgue?"

"Yes."

Parish nodded with sudden decision. "I'd like to do something in Victor's memory. Give the boy a decent burial."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Parish." Gladys was having a little trouble keeping her voice steady.

"My pleasure. He seemed a decent lad. Liked him on sight. Had he asked you to marry him?"

"We were friends, that's all."

"Too bad. He'd have made a fine husband. Did Eddie speak of his uncle often?"

A bull's-eye for me, I thought, smiling tightly to myself in the closet.

"Oh, yes," Gladys said. "He read me all of his uncle's letters." She frowned. "As a matter of fact, his uncle sent him a snapshot once. I think I have it. Eddie traveled light and I keep a lot of his personal papers in my wardrobe trunk."

"Was there much resemblance?"

"A little, around the eyes. It's hard to remember details like that."

Parish sighed. "Victor was my right hand man for years, and I haven't a single memento. Would

the picture still be in your possession?"

"I think so. Shall I try to find it?"

His face brightened eagerly. "Why, yes. I'd appreciate that very much."

She swung open her wardrobe trunk, removed one of the drawers, placed it on the bed, and bent over to sort through an accumulation of papers. The man behind her rose silently. His lips, I saw, were pulled back over his teeth. The whole cast of his face had changed, its features distorted. He raised the walking stick.

I kicked the door open and was on him like a cat, gripping his wrist. An enraged growl tore at his throat. He twisted violently, trying to break loose. I bulled him across the room and wrenched the weapon free.

He crouched back, panting, a bloated vein throbbing, spasmodically in a blue diagonal across his temple.

Gladys had wheeled and was watching us, white-faced, stifling a cry.

I saw the red beard quivering with indignation as he tried to assume an air of outraged innocence. "What does this mean?"

"It means it's all over, Victor," I said.

"What?" His jaw hung askew.

"You heard me. The masquerade is over. You tried to pull a fast one and it almost worked. Malcolm Parish died in Italy last year and you took his place. No one knew him there and it was easy. You grew a beard like his and learned to forge his signature. You changed your appearance and your handwriting, but you couldn't change your character. Parish was satisfied to live on his income, but you were more ambitious. You wanted the whole works."

Victor Lang swallowed audibly. He was breathing hard through distended nostrils. "You're crazy!"

"Not me," I said. "You are. Crazy to think you could get away with killing Eddie because he recognized you. You couldn't swear him to silence. The boy was too honest to go along with your stunt, and he threatened to upset your apple-cart. He'd seen my name in the paper connected with the Parish Lines and said he was going to see me right after the last show. But you got there first and nailed him when he came out of the elevator."

Victor Lang was shaking and trying to control it. His nose and mouth were pinched and gray. "You have no proof, Jordan."

"All the proof we need," I said. "You think we can't wash that red dye out of your beard and hair. And how about the key you took from Eddie's pocket so you could search his room in case he left some memento to link you with the crime? You were there when I arrived and you hid in the closet. I owe you one for that clout you gave me."

He stepped back, nervously.

"You were in a sweat," I said, "and that's why you came back here to the hotel again. You had to be sure Eddie hadn't left anything with Gladys. When you learned she had a picture you were scared she might recognize you. So you decided to swing the stick again. And it was all for nothing, Lang. She had no picture. It was a plant. We have enough proof to strap you in the chair."

He broke. His eyes raced wildly around the room and he lunged at the door. I caught him behind the ear with his own walking stick and knocked him sprawling against the wall. I was ready to deliver an encore when Gladys cried out: "No, Scott, please . . ."

She was right, of course. I was neither his jury nor his executioner. The tightness ebbed out of me.

"Okay," I said. "Call Headquarters, will you, honey?"

Victor Lang was watching me with bankrupt eyes as I took out his ten thousand dollar check and tore it up. I felt very sad. And then I saw Gladys. I saw the admiration and the promise in her face.

I didn't feel sad any more.

BREAK
PRIVATE
INVESTIGA
OUT

A NOVELETTE

BY JOHN G. ALLEN

"He looked at me with eyes that were glazing over. Then his lips moved again: 'Breakout . . . Caribbean . . . money . . .'"

For the first of August, it stunk. Dark overcast skies, torrential rain, intermingled with claps of thunder and flashes of lightning.

I was sitting in my office, smoking a cigar, waiting for some client to call and hire me to find his wife, or recover some lost jewels, even a lost dog. But in this weather, the average man would postpone finding his wife until the weather improved. His dog, maybe, but not his wife.

I decided to call it a day and go home and was putting on my topcoat when the telephone rang. I leaned over the desk, picked up the receiver and gave my number.

A man's deep voice said.

"Is that Frank McGrath?"

I told him it was and asked what could I do for him.

There was a few moments pause, then the voice said. "How would you like to pick up five thousand pounds?"

I gripped the receiver firmer in my hand.

"Who is that?" I rasped back.

"Henderson — George Henderson" the man said, "do you remember me?"

I remembered him all right. He had been a top class insurance investigator until a hoodlum had blasted him with a sawn off shotgun.

The doctors had done their best for him, but he was left with a permanent limp.

The last time I had heard of him, he was hitting the bottle hard. That was about four years ago.

"Hello George, how's tricks?" I said.

"Not too bad, Frank," he paused, then continued, "I'm serious about the five grand, but I don't want to speak on the telephone. I'm near your office, can I come and see you?"

I glanced through the window at the pouring rain outside. "Sure George, any time you want."

The single light bulb above my head flickered, as a flash of lightning lit the room. There was no answer, the 'phone had gone dead.

I hung around, hoping George Henderson would call again.

Henderson was not the type of

man who would ring me up after four years to ask me would I like to earn five thousand pounds for a joke. He would need a good reason, but what?

I thought back to the last case we were on together, the one in which he had been shot.

At the time, we were both working for the same insurance company. George was the top investigator and I was learning the ropes.

He was a big man in every way. Big in stature, big in heart, but a dedicated investigator who, once he had his teeth in a case, never let go until he had it licked.

The Patterson gang had hi-jacked a security truck in London and got away with a cool eighty thousand pounds in used notes.

The insurance company gave the case top priority and both George and I, unlimited funds to catch the gang—and get the money back.

Following an underworld tip off, we went to where the gang were hiding out.

Instead of calling in the police, George wanted to grab the gang on our own.

Well we did, but George got blasted in the legs for his efforts.

We turned the gang over to the police, but there was no trace of the eighty thousand pounds, not a single note of it.

Three of the gang, the Patterson brothers, received seven years each in the maximum security prison, Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight.

The other two members of the gang, Walt Carter and Chuck Barton, received five years each in Pentonville. The reward offered for the return of the eighty thousand pounds, was ten thousand pounds.

It was after that case I began to operate on my own as a private investigator.

I lit another cigar and paced up and down the worn carpet in front of my desk. Half of ten thousand pounds was five thousand pounds, exactly the figure George Henderson had offered me an hour ago.

The sound of the opening of the outer door of my waiting room interrupted my thoughts.

I moved to the connecting door and opened it.

Leaning against the jamb of the door was a tall, burly man, in a dirty wet raincoat, with a black trilby hat on the back of his head. His face was wet from the rain and he looked older and more haggard than when I last saw him four years ago.

"George. You old devil! Where did you come from?" I moved to shake hands with him, but as I got close to him, he slumped forward into my arms.

His mouth moved, but no words came out, only a gurgling sound.

I grabbed him and tried to hold him up. It was then I saw the knife sticking out of his back.

"George! Who did it George?"

He looked at me with eyes that were glazing over, then his lips moved again.

"Breakout — Caribbean — Money —"

"Money? What money, George?" I asked, but it was too late—he was dead.

I gently lowered him to the ground.

Whatever he had tried to tell me was in those three mumbled words.

Picking up the telephone receiver, I rang the police and told them I had a murdered man on my hands. I gave my address, then hung up.

George Henderson had been like a father to me. Tough when he had to be, but with a heart of gold. I looked down at his lined and worn face, which would smile no more.

The knife which had an ornamental handle, was still sticking out of his back. There may be a chance of finger prints on it—George was dead, he would feel no more pain. If he was on the case, he would want the killer found and convicted, so I left it where it was.

Eventually they arrived. First a squad car with two uniformed police.

They asked my name—did I know the name of the deceased etc? The usual patter of a murder enquiry. Then the plain clothes boys arrived.

They shooed the uniformed men out of the room and began to ask the same questions. Did I know the deceased? Why was he coming to see me? Did he have any enemies?

What a joke! An investigator who had helped put away probably dozens of crooks in his time and they ask had he any enemies.

The police doctor came, diagnosed cause of death, the fingerprint boys took my prints and took away the knife in an envelope. George went out on a stretcher.

I kept back George's last words —also his offer of five thousand pounds.

Let the police start this one from cold. I wanted the killer for myself.

Eventually, they had a telephone call from Headquarters, saying there was no prints on the knife. If I left town I must tell them where I was going. Sure—I'd do just that, and a lot more.

George Henderson had a family somewhere, if I found the money, his family would have first chance of the reward. But first, I had to find out exactly what he had uncovered, something so important that he had to be killed to shut his mouth—or had his mouth been shut in time. After the police had left, I thought back over his last words.

"Break—Caribbean—Money."

There was nothing I could do tonight, so I switched off the light, locked the door, went out and got stoned on the best Scotch I could find. George would have liked it that way.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, I went across to the insurance company offices where George and I used to work.

I was still on good terms with them, so they let me have a look through the file on the Patterson case.

The trail may be cold by now, but I had a strange feeling someone was still sitting on that eighty grand.

There was nothing in the file that I had not known five years ago; then it almost hit me in the eye, it was so obvious!

Sam Patterson, the oldest of the three brothers and also the leader of the gang, had a girl friend by the name of June Ferguson. At the time of the robbery, she was twenty one years of age, but after the gang were arrested, she disappeared without trace.

It was my only lead, so I took it. All I had to do was find an attractive brunette, who had disappeared five years before, at the same time as eighty grand in used notes.

I packed an overnight bag and caught the midnight train to Edinburgh, in the Scotish Highlands.

As I lay in my sleeper, I had a nightmare, where a dead man fell on me, with an ornamental dagger sticking out of his back. Five jailbirds, beating on their prison bars, shouting 'Money-money', while a dark figure screamed and threw handfuls of one pound notes over me.

I woke up in a cold sweat, as the train pulled into Edinburgh station at 8 a.m.

After I had had a meal of ham and eggs and drunk two cups of coffee, I caught a taxi and gave the cabby June Ferguson's last known address.

It turned out to be a worn and weather beaten, old terraced house, on the outskirts of Edinburgh.

The driver was going to stop outside the house, but I told him to drive on and let me out at the corner of the street. I paid him off and walked back to where June Ferguson used to live.

My only lead to eighty grand—and George Henderson's killer!

I knocked at the door and it was opened by a little, white haired lady, who admitted being Mrs. Ferguson.

I gave her one of my cards and asked her could I speak to her for a few minutes.

The old lady went indoors for her glasses, put them on the end of her nose, then read my car aloud,

"Frank McGrath. Private Investigator."

She pushed the card back into my hand and tried to close the door in my face.

"Mrs. Ferguson, all I want is five minutes of your time—my ex-partner has been murdered—if you have any idea where your daughter June is, please tell me, as she may be in danger." I said quietly.

The old lady peered at me around the door for a few seconds—then slowly, she opened the door wider and said briefly.

"Come in then—but, only for five minutes remember." She led me into a tidy, but old fashioned living room.

"Will you have a cup of tea?" she asked, when I was sitting down.

I nodded my head. "Yes please," and she disappeared out of the room, without another word.

Over the fireplace, was an old alarm clock and wedged behind it were some picture postcards.

In the kitchen I could hear the rattle of cups and saucers, so I quietly rose to my feet and glanced at the postcards. They were from Spain, Portugal and the most recent one—with a postdate two weeks before, was from Southampton.

The picture was of the Queen Elizabeth liner sailing out of Southampton docks.

The scribbled writing said.

"Keeping well—had a nice trip. Love June."

I was sitting in the armchair, when Mrs. Ferguson came back into the room, with the tea things on a tray.

While she poured the tea, I briefly explained what had happened to George Henderson, if she knew where her daughter June was, to let me know, in case her life was in danger.

For a brief second, her eyes fastened on the postcards behind the clock, then they flashed back to the tea pot. As she handed me a cup of tea, she said.

"Honestly, I have not seen June for five years."

I sipped the tea, then said, "What about those postcards, the ones from Spain, Portugal and Southampton?"

The old lady suddenly began to cry. It is times like that when I hate my job.

"Where in Southampton does your daughter stay, Mrs. Ferguson?" I asked quietly.

She dabbed at her nose with a small handkerchief.

"I have no idea—honestly. Those cards are the only contact I have with my daughter. Anyway, you are not the only one to come here bothering me."

I put the tea cup down on the table.

"Who else has been here?"

"Not the police—two men, who had no manners at all, they threatened me with violence before they left," she sobbed.

"When was that?" I asked her.

She blew her nose noisily. "About a week ago," then she dashed out of the room, her crying ringing in my ears.

I rose to my feet, took a five pound note out of my wallet and tucked it amongst the postcards from the daughter whom had not been home for over five years and quietly let myself out.

It was a sunny day, so I decided to walk back to the railway station.

The road was deserted, except for a stationary truck parked about thirty yards away. I was halfway across the road, when I heard the truck's engine roaring and as I turned to look, I realized it was heading straight at me.

I tried to dive for the footpath.

The offside wing of the truck hit me and threw me into a sprawling heap in the kerb. My head hit a piece of solid Scottish granite kerbstone. As the pain struck through my legs, another pain flashed through my skull and I dived into a bottomless swirling black pit, so that I kept falling, falling, and falling.

CHAPTER 3

It was two days before I could leave hospital. The nurses were cute and had warm, soft hands and shapely figures, but I wanted to be on my way. I must have found something important to be half killed in broad daylight. The only thing I had discovered, was that June Ferguson had been in Southampton two weeks ago, so my next clue was somewhere in Southampton.

The doctor called me a fool for walking out, but time was precious for me.

I arrived in London the next day, changed my ruined suit and packed as much gear as I may need. I put the holster on my left hip and slipped into it my faithful .38 Smith and Wesson revolver with the butt forward for a right hand cross draw. I felt as stiff as a board, but I could still draw the .38 quick enough to drill the next hood who was going to try to give me an early grave.

The last time I had been in Southampton, was just before I was shipped out to Korea, as a young Marine Commando. It had changed a lot since then. Now the city was full of skyscraper office blocks, flats and supermarkets.

I tried to think how a person would act if they were trying to get lost—so I headed for the waterfront.

It was at my fifth bar that someone remembered a dark haired, good looking, Scots girl, by the name of June.

She was quite a character, so they told me, a stewardess off one of the liners who, when she came ashore, spent money as though it was water.

They had not seen her for six months, which could mean she was still at sea. Then I remembered the picture postcards in an old lady's home, from Spain, Portugal and Southampton.

June Ferguson could have been at sea for the past six months, but she was ashore two weeks ago, to post that card. There was one place that could tell me when she came ashore—The Seaman's Union.

There was a middle aged clerk on duty. I rolled a one pound note in my fingers, then told him I was June Ferguson's brother and wanted to find her quickly.

After a bit of stalling, he told me she had been paid off a luxury liner three weeks before. I placed the pound note on the desk between us.

He had no idea where she went, when ashore—but many of the seafaring people spent a lot of time on

the Caribbean gambling ship, losing their hard earned wages. The word Caribbean rang a bell. It was one of the words George Henderson gasped out before he died. How did I find the Caribbean, I asked the clerk.

"Just hang about the Ocean Bar and the sucker bait will pick you up and see you aboard."

I let him pick up the one pound note and I began to walk out of the office.

"If you are well loaded," he called after me.

I was well loaded—in more ways than one.

CHAPTER 4

The Ocean Bar was one of those big, glossy places, with a large oval shaped bar, over which swam a continuous stream of coloured tropical fish.

The barmen were dressed as ships stewards, but it was the women that surprised me. There were stacks of them and all good looking enough to be show girls. Perhaps they were.

The lounge was decked out as though in the tropics, with fancy little tables, around which sat a lot of obvious tourists, from all parts of the world.

Pushing my way through the crowd to the bar, I ordered a large Scotch. I was wearing a small checked, grey suit, white shirt and blue tie. On my feet I had dark patterned socks and pigskin shoes. Oh yes, I was also wearing clean underwear and a .38 Smith and Wesson. I was everything the smart man about town should be.

I got a cigar going, downed the Scotch and ordered another double. If I was going to get on board the 'Caribbean' to-night, I would have to make myself look an easy mark.

Looking round the lounge, I began to admire the talent. A man could enjoy himself in a place like this. Two attractive females came in to the bar, just after I did and sat down on two high stools, next to me.

One was a tall, well stacked blonde. Next to her, was a fascinating Oriental girl, who was wearing a green cheung-san dress with a high neck and a slit up the side, which ended about six inches from her hip. Her face was small, petite, with a mysterious look about her eyes. The cheung-san hugged her slim, yet supple figure, but it was her legs that caught my attention. They were gorgeous.

She saw me admiring her, half smiled, then turned her head away and spoke to the blonde, who was wearing an almost transparent, black chiffon blouse, no brassiere, a black and white checked mini-skirt and black kinky boots.

The blonde had a good look at me, then they both laughed.

"What's the joke?" I grinned at them.

The blonde answered.

"You have a certain look on your face."

"What kind of look?" I queried.

"A look that means you are trouble for a girl," answered the Oriental girl in a quiet, yet musical voice.

"Trouble? Me? No, all I want is a few drinks and some action," and I shook my right fist as though there were dice in it and pretended to throw them on the bar top.

"Oh! that action," said the blonde, with a disappointed expression on her face.

"You look like a man who wants a girl and our flat is only around the corner."

I knocked back my Scotch, then said with a smile. "But we have not even been introduced."

The Oriental girl burst out laughing, shook her head several times, then turned to face me, with a solemn expression on her face.

"Your name please?"

"Frank McGrath," I answered.

The Oriental girl turned to the blonde.

"Gina, I would like you to meet Frank McGrath," then she looked at me, still with that solemn expression on her face.

"Frank, I would like you to meet Gina, my friend. She is nice girl, but oversexed."

As the blonde and I shook hands, the Oriental girl burst out laughing.

"And what is your name?" I said to her.

She slid off the stool and stood erect in front of me, she could not have been more than five feet tall.

They call me Passion of The East, but my real name is Josie O'Brien."

"What?" was all I could say.

"It is simple," said the Oriental girl. My father was Irishman, who met my mother in Hong Kong. He sailed away before I was born, but my mother gave me a good Irish name."

The girl had either a terrific sense of humour, or a broad outlook on life. Come to think of it, she did have the good looks of an Eurasian.

Her hand was cool and small as we shook hands. Her eyes, were a sparkling dark brown, with flecks of gold in them. She had a mischievous expression on her face one minute—a bland Oriental look the next.

It would be a great pleasure getting to know her better!

The two girls let me buy them about six Scotch and dry gingers each. Gina the blonde, left me in no doubt how she would like to spend the rest of the night, it could be fun, but I wanted to get aboard the 'Caribbean'.

A small, shifty looking, over dressed character came into the bar and began going round to most of the girls. He appeared to be whispering something to them. Then he came up to Passion of The East, or Josie O'Brien, as she called herself, and Gina. I turned my head away,

but overheard him say in a cockney accent.

"Keep off the jetty to-night—the cops are watching the 'Caribbean'," then he moved on, speaking to other girls.

"Who feels like having a party?" I said.

The two girls looked at each other, their nights work, as sucker bait for the 'Caribbean' gambling ship, had been cancelled out.

The blonde looked well oiled by now, her face was flushed and she kept breathing in and sticking her breasts out at me, like a woman will do, when she is trying to draw your attention.

"That's a great idea, Frank," she sighed. "Let's go back to our flat—eh! Josie?" and she moved forward towards me—rubbed her shapely thighs against mine and breathed in deeply, so that her nipples almost burst through her chiffon blouse. The Oriental girl was watching the blonde's performance with a strange expression on her face.

I bought a bottle of Scotch while the two girls went to the powder room, then went out into the night, on one arm a beautiful, intelligent and witty Oriental girl, by the name of Passion of The East and on the other arm, a tall, curvy, high breasted blonde, with very obvious sexual desires.

It looked as though it was going to be a hard days night!

We walked along the wide sidewalk, Josie, the Oriental girl, said their flat was only about a hundred yards away.

As we came to an alley, Gina, the blonde said.

"Down here, darling—not far now."

"There was no light in the alley, but the girls never faltered in their step.

They were hanging on to my arms, the bottle of Scotch, I held by the neck in my right hand.

"How far is your flat now?" I asked.

"Never mind the flat, you snooping bastard," said a man's voice, somewhere in the darkness in front of me.

I tried to get my hands free, but the girls hung on to them like grim death.

The next second, something hard hit me in the pit of the stomach and I doubled up. Almost. The two lovely girls I was going to have a good time with, were still holding me up. A fist hit me in the throat and jack-knifed me back against a wall, as the girls let go of me.

I landed on my backside, like a sack of potatoes, with the bottle of scotch still clutched in my right fist.

A dark shadowy figure lunged over me, swinging something in his hand.

That was as far as he got, because I hooked the bottle of Sotch upwards, as hard as I could—right between his legs.

There was a loud scream and the dark figure doubled up.

I got to my feet somehow, as another man leapt at me. I caught him side-ways against my left hip and swung him to the wall, slamming him hard against it. For a second, he was silhouetted against the wall, as I lashed out with the bottle of Scotch at his face.

I felt it hit something soft, there was just a dull thump of a sound, then I swung up with my left foot.

It hit him hard in his guts, as he pitched forward in a heap on the ground.

I stood there in the darkened alley, as wild as a tiger, with the bottle swinging in my hand.

The other creep was trying to crawl away up the alley. I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him to his feet. I dropped the bottle of Scotch and stood back a pace. He began to sway, as I hit him with a lovely swinging right upper cut. It hit him on the side of the jaw and spun him round with his back to me. I grabbed him and ran him head first at the wall, once—twice—three times, until he was nothing but a bloody mess, then I did the same with the other bastard. No one jumps McGrath and gets away with it!

I staggered around and looked for the two girls. All I could hear was the clatter of their shoes, as they ran away up the darkened alley and into the night.

Feeling around on the ground. I found the bottle of Scotch. It was not even broken. Ripping off the metal foil, I pulled out the cork and helped myself to about half the bottle, then I slung the half empty bottle against the wall, where it smashed into a thousand pieces.

I felt for my .38, it was still at my left hip. I had not even needed it—this time—but there was always tomorrow.

I staggered up the alley into civilization, where people led clean, decent, hard working lives.

You can say that again!

CHAPTER 5

The next morning, I slept late in my hotel room. I got up about 11 a.m. had a hot shower, then a cold one—a good rub down with a rough towel, a shave, then drank three cups of black coffee.

By noon I was almost back to normal, so I went into the hotel restaurant and ordered a large steak, potatoes baked in their jackets, tomatoes and mushrooms, drank two more cups of black coffee, a large brandy and smoked a cigar.

I strolled into the lounge, slumped into an armchair and began to glance at the newspapers. The words almost leapt out of the paper at me.

"Two men murdered in alley."

"Late last night in a deserted alley in the City centre, two men were brutally beaten to death."

I sat up rigid in the armchair. It had been a tough fight, they were

going to rough me up—two against one. The odds were against me. Sure, I had lost my temper and hammered them, but I never intended killing them.

My hands began to shake, so that I could hardly hold the paper, but I carried on reading.

"Although the men were badly beaten, the police state that cause of death was from stab wounds."

Stab wounds! I never even carry a knife—and certainly did not use one last night.

"The police believe it was an underworld killing, as the deceased, Chuck Barton and Walter Carter, were only released from Pentonville Prison two weeks ago, after serving a five years sentence for their part in a Security Vehicle hold up, five years ago. The remaining members of the gang are still serving their sentences in Parkhurst Prison, on the Isle of Wight. Scotland Yard detectives are in charge of the case and it is expected that an early arrest will be made."

I sat there as though in a trance, my mind running back over everything that had happened.

First, George Henderson ringing me up with an offer of five thousand pounds—exactly half the reward money, for the return of the eighty grand which was never recovered from the Security truck hold up.

Then, George dying in my arms, with a dagger in his back. My trip to Edinburgh, where a truck ran me down. My visit to Southampton where I walked into a trap, with two cuties as the bait, then my fight with the two hoods, when I left them patients for the casualty ward, but certainly not candidates for the morgue.

Well, if I did not kill them—who did?

Someone who knew they would be in that alley—the same person who set me up for a beating—probably a knife in my back as dessert.

In the dark, I never had a chance to recognise Barton and Carter, but they knew me, because one of them called me a snooping bastard, which I suppose is one way of describing a private eye.

George Henderson was definitely onto something.—What were his last three words? "Breakout—Caribbean—money."

I had a very good idea what the word money meant. The eighty grand in used notes! Caribbean was the name of a gambling ship, that cleaned out the suckers at sea, beyond the three mile limit.

But what did 'Breakout' mean?

I stuffed the newspaper in a waste paper basket, walked into the bar and ordered a large brandy. I needed it.

Just as I was tilting back the glass to drain the last dregs, I suddenly realised what George Henderson meant when he gasped 'Breakout'.

The Patterson brothers were in Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight, a maximum security prison, because of the prison being on an island, like

Alcatraz had been in the United States.

And the 'Caribbean' gambling ship sailed around the Isle of Wight every night!

Breakout! Yes—a breakout from Parkhurst prison and to confirm it, the first two members of the gang to be released, get stabbed to death in a back alley in Southampton—a few miles across the water from Parkhurst.

I ordered another large brandy and was just sipping it, when I saw someone I knew talking to the hotel receptionist.

It was one of the detectives who investigated George Henderson's killing. I saw the detective look in the register—flash his card and the receptionist handed over the key off the hook number seven, the number of my room!

I waited until he walked up the stairs, then knocked back the brandy and strolled back into the dining room, through the kitchen and into the street outside.

I had to move fast, or I was going to have a triple murder rap stuck on me!

CHAPTER 6

I was able to get my Citreon out of the hotel car park and drove away out of Southampton as fast as I could, until I came to one of those country inns with ivy growing up the walls, like you see on English calendars.

After what had happened to me in the past week, I did not want to get involved in anything—even a teddy bears picnic, until I went aboard the Caribbean.

I parked the Citreon and went into the Forest Inn, as it was called.

It was a dim lit relaxing bar, with Pepe Jaramillo music being softly piped into the atmosphere from a hidden speaker.

There were only a few people in the bar, mainly sitting on leather seating around the room. Behind the bar was a good looking, fortyish year old female, who dispensed the drinks.

"Good morning, sir," she smiled at me.

Some women can look marvellous in their twenties and thirties, but look haggard in their forties. Not this one!

She had poise, good looks and a marvellous taste in clothes.

Her gown, of gold lame, must have cost at least fifty pounds and looked as though she was poured into it, not too much, not too little. She had short, golden-brown wavy hair, nice features, a pleasing smile —and two of the wickedest eyes I had ever seen.

"I think I will have a large brandy," I said.

"Only think, sir?" she queried with a smile.

I laughed out—and Christ, could I do with a laugh that morning.

"Okay, *I will* have a double—and have one yourself," I grinned.

"Thank you, sir—the customer is always right," she said and put the two brandies on the bar.

We raised our glasses—smiled at each other in a silent toast and drank our brandy.

"Are you on holiday?" the woman who made me feel human again asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "More like business with pleasure—"

"But not much pleasure?" the woman cracked back.

I laughed out, the second time in as many minutes. Suddenly I had an idea.

"Is there a chance of booking a room here?" I asked.

"On your own sir?" she asked.

I nodded my head. "Yes—just myself."

The woman picked up a telephone receiver on the bar and spoke into it.

"There is a gentleman," and she glanced at me with those wicked eyes of hers, "Who would like to book a room," she paused a few seconds, then looked at me. "How long for?"

"Three days—perhaps a week—it depends how quickly I can clear up some business I am involved in." I answered.

Involved in! The understatement of the year!

"Probably three days, the gentleman wants to see how good the service is before he commits himself," she said into the receiver with a half smile on her face.

She put down the receiver. "The room is yours, sign in later will you. Any luggage?"

That was my problem. I could not say, I had to leave in a hurry as the cops were after me for three murders!

"No—I have no luggage—I was driving by—liked the look of the hotel and stopped."

"Fate sir—that's what it is. Fate!"

Could be at that. At least I was in a quiet spot and I could be on the jetty at Southampton easy enough to board the Caribbean. How I got off the Caribbean depended on two things. How quickly I could draw my .38 Smith and Wesson and if I found George Henderson's killer before he found me.

I had another brandy and smoked a cigar, as though I had no cares in the world. Up to now, I had been hit by a truck and had the bruises to prove it. Got worked over by two, now very dead hoodlums, ruined two of my best suits and now all my other clothes were back in the hotel in Southampton, with a cop probably hiding under the bed.

All this and not even a client to pay my expenses!

It was lucky I went to the Seaman's Union offices. The clerk's tip off, about the Ocean Bar really got things moving.

Come to think of it, the Oriental girl and the blonde walked into the bar, almost straight after I did —and sat down right next to me.

While I bought the Scotch, they

went to the powder room, long enough to pass on a message that they would be bringing home the chicken—all trussed up.

I began to have a strange feeling about the clerk at the Seaman's Union office, as though he had set me up.

I finished my drink, got into my car and drove back to Southampton.

I parked the car near the Union offices and started walking. As I turned the corner, I saw a crowd of people looking at something on the ground. Curiosity got the better of me and I squeezed through the crowd to see what they were staring at.

It was a small, middle aged man, lying on the ground, just as though he was a rag doll someone had thrown down. A man was explaining what had happened.

"He never had a chance, he started to cross the road as this truck came round the corner. The driver made no attempt to miss him. He was thrown into the air, then the truck drove off, without stopping."

I had a look at the man's face who lay in the gutter, a crumpled battered heap.

An ambulance man felt his pulse, put his ear over his heart,—then shook his head.

They lifted him onto a stretcher and slowly covered him with a blanket.

It was no use me going into the Seaman's Union office. The man I had gone to see, the same man who sent me to the Ocean Bar was dead!

I got into my car and drove slowly back to the Forest Inn.

After four killings, I was not taking any chances.

CHAPTER 7

I slept until 6 p.m., then had a long soak in the bath.

In my hotel room was an electric shaver, which I used to get rid of my five o'clock shadow.

Coming back from Southampton, I had picked up a few shirts and socks, a couple of ties and some things I may need. I also bought a suitcase. One large enough to carry eighty grand in pound notes!

At about 9 p.m., I was parked near the Ocean Bar. It was about that time last night when the girls were getting ready to take the suckers on to the Caribbean. Then, that little, overdressed tout, had tipped them off, the cops were restive.

I was slumped behind the steering wheel with a newspaper in front of me.

Several girls came out of the Ocean Bar with men and hailed taxis which all moved off in the direction of the docks.

About a quarter of an hour later, a big, fat, well dressed man, wobbled out of the Ocean Bar and who should be trotting alongside him, but my drinking partner of the night before. Passion of The East.

I let them get to the taxi rank.

Passion of The East, was buttering him up okay. Once he got on the Caribbean he would be lucky to get off with his shirt.

The fat man was puffing at a long cigar, peering up the road for a taxi as I slid the Citreon into the kerb alongside him. Passion had her back to me as I opened the offside door, grabbed her around the waist and slung her in the passenger seat.

I slammed the door shut, ran round to my side, while the fat man stood there open mouthed.

"Don't you ever go near my wife again," I shouted at him, "She has four kids at home crying for her," and jumped in the car, switched on the ignition and drove the car away, with an astonished Oriental female beside me.

"Let me out—let me out," she screamed and began to beat me with her tiny fists. I missed a double decker bus by inches, went through a set of traffic lights at red, then swung left down a side street with the girl now sinking her teeth into my left hand.

I drove into a deserted car park, switched off the ignition and shook her. "You little bitch! I ought to turn you over to the police." I snarled.

She suddenly realised what I had said.

"Police! No—please do not take me to police," she pleaded in her musical voice.

"Then settle down," I snapped. "I'm not going to rape you or anything. All I want you to do is take me on board the Caribbean."

She sat there like a little trapped animal, a little trapped animal that could fight and bite something twice as big as herself.

"Is that all you want?" she said with a puzzled expression on her face.

I nodded my head. "Yeah—that's all, but God help you if you try to set me up for another mugging." I growled.

Her brain was working overtime, I could see that from the expression on her face.

I am very sorry for last night," she whispered.

"So am I," I said.

"I was told I would be beaten if I did not take you to those men," and she started to cry.

If it's one thing I cannot stand, it is a girl crying, especially a pretty girl.

I offered her my handkerchief and she blew her nose and dabbed her eyes.

I do not know how it happened, but suddenly she was in my arms and her soft warm lips were pressed on mine.

Her perfume was like a drug to my senses and as her tongue darted in and out of my mouth, I felt my control slipping.

"Isn't there somewhere we can go?" I said quietly.

She nodded her head, then kissed me once more.

"Drive back to main road—towards docks—I have little room," then she laughed, "with no naughty men waiting. One naughty man," and she kissed me again, "is enough for me."

I started the car and drove off to her little room.

She led me by the hand up the stairs, I found out later why she was called Passion of The East!

CHAPTER 8

I eventually went aboard the 'Caribbean' about midnight.

Little Passion of The East had given me the low down on who everyone was on board, how and when the launch left the dock area, with its cargo of itchy fingered gamblers and what time the Caribbean closed down.

She was annoyed because I had still wanted to go out to the gambling ship.

"Boy! you really are compulsive gambler," she had said bad temperedly, as we left her flat about 11.30 p.m. I let her go on thinking that, it was better than telling her the truth. That I was going out to the Caribbean to find George Henderson's killer—then I would tell him who I was—and why I was going to kill him.

The 'Caribbean' had the appearance of an old type destroyer. She was silhouetted against the gleaming full moon, as the motor launch did a long curving arc and hove to alongside the gangway. The hull was painted white and all the suckers were welcome aboard by the Captain and First Mate, who were in white uniforms.

It must have been very impressive for a man to go on board, with an attractive hostess on his arm and have the Captain and First Mate salute and say, "Welcome aboard, Sir."

Yeah—very impressive—while all the time they were sneering behind their set smiling faces and thinking, "another sucker to be taken to the cleaners."

Passion had simmered down by now, she slid her hand through my arm, snuggled up to me and kissed me. I think she was trying to tell me something.

Although the hull was of an old destroyer—the interior was really something! They must have ripped out most of the bulk heads, wardroom and mess decks and started from scratch to re-build. The first thing that met you was a long American type bar, with five tough looking barmen who probably doubled as 'bouncers'.

There was a small dance floor to the left, where a trio of musicians, in evening dress, were playing soft smoochy music on vibes—base and a guitar.

On the dance floor were a few, slow moving couples, their arms wrapped around each other.

At the bar was a laughing crowd of men and women. I recognized

most of the girls from the Ocean Bar.

I ordered champagne for Passion and I. If I was supposed to be a wealthy gambler—I may as well do it in style. We drank two glasses, then went on to the dance floor.

They were playing "Desafinado" and apart from the Oriental girl's other qualifications as a perfect female, she could dance like an angel —although she was a little devil.

She had a way of making you believe you were the best man in the world.

Tonight, she was wearing another cheung-san gown, which she had changed into before we left her flat. The colour was tangerine, with a pattern of small green dragons breathing smoke and flame out of their mouths. I knew exactly how they felt!

We never spoke—we had no need to.

I only hoped to God that she was not too involved in the set up, because when it broke, there was going to be trouble—a hell of a lot of trouble.

Hung on her right arm, she had a tiny jewelled evening bag, which swung about rather heavily as we danced.

At the other side of the dance floor, I noticed a closed door on which was printed 'Casino' in large white letters. A couple of tall, heavy set characters in evening dress, were standing on either side of it.

One had a broken nose and a cauliflower ear, the other had a broad, wide face, with a flattened nose and narrow, nasty looking eyes under bushy eyebrows, which joined together over the flattened bridge of his nose.

"What's through the door?" I said to Passion.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Oh—the Casino. Gambling." She squeezed my hand. "But let us continue dancing, you enjoying yourself?" she whispered in her musical voice.

"Of course I am, but I would like to look in—later." I hurried to say.

She deliberately kicked me on the shin. "You lose—soon enough," she answered with a strange expression on her face.

The music stopped and we walked back to the bar and had another glass of champagne.

I was on the last part of the journey. A journey that began with a dying man's last words. But I had not the faintest idea of what to do next—all I could do was wait for something to happen.

Then it did.

The door to the Casino opened and a tall, haggard looking man, with grey hair, walked through into the bar. He was about my height—perhaps an inch taller. He was wearing a white tuxedo, but his face, which was pale, was unsmiling. At his side was a tall, beautiful blonde, wearing a long, black, backless evening dress.

At first I could not believe the

transformation. The blonde was Gina—the sexy blonde who, with the Oriental girl, had set me up for a beating.

But that time she looked a 'floozie' and acted like one, only now, she moved and looked like a film star.

Gina never noticed me.

As she got near to the bar, all the girls moved away for her, as though she was a Queen. One of the waiters was making a big show, of opening a bottle of champagne for her. He poured some into a glass. Gina offered it to the haggard looking man with grey hair. He pushed it away saying in a hard voice.

"Never mind the maid's water. Give me Irish whiskey. A large one."

The barman gave the grey haired man his large whiskey. He picked it up and tossed it straight back.

"Same again," he snarled.

Right at the back of my brain, a little bell was ringing.

I was watching the man carefully, somewhere, I had seen him—or someone very much like him.

I moved closer into the crowd, I needed more time to remember this haggard looking man. His eyes were deep in his head—his cheeks were hollow—and his vivid, grey hair. No, I would remember a face like that. Names I forget—but never faces.

"Leave the bottle," the man snarled at the barman.

The barman glanced at Gina, the blonde. She nodded her head and the barman placed the almost full bottle of Irish whiskey, on the bar top.

He poured himself about four fingers of rot-gut into the glass and drained it back. He looked like a man who was making up for lost time.

Lost time! That was it! I had seen him before—but many years ago, when he was younger—sprouting a moustache and dark brown hair.

But his pleasant, hail fellow, well met, attitude was just the same.

He was Sam Patterson, the leader of the Patterson gang, whom I had helped get a seven year stretch in Parkhurst.

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey and strutted back into the Casino, leaving the blonde at the bar.

She tried to cover up by drinking some champagne and saying something light hearted to some of the girls. But she was worried.

I decided to give her more worries.

I gripped her left elbow firmly and said quietly, "I think you promised me the next dance."

She looked at me open mouthed, but I moved her steadily through the crowd, on to the dance floor.

I put my arm around her and began the motions of dancing.

"Don't try anything clever," I said. "I want just one thing."

"What's that?" she said in a flat voice.

"Eighty grand in notes—and I want it before the launch leaves for the mainland."

She stopped in her tracks, as though hundred pound weights were tied to her feet.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she somehow managed to say.

"Yes you do. That creep is there," and I nodded my head towards the Casino. "That's Sam Patterson who should still be doing time in Parkhurst, but you got him off the island. How, I don't know."

"Me?" she said in a high pitched voice. "Why me?"

I gave up trying to dance. "Because you are no more a blonde than I am. Besides your dark parting is beginning to show, you should never have tried to move in on me yourself. Last night in the Ocean Bar, only someone who knew who I was, could have moved in so quickly."

"So I dye my hair! Lots of women do," she snapped.

"Yeah, but they are not all from a little house in Edinburgh—they are not all called June Ferguson, and they are not all the girl friend of Sam Patterson."

The two tough guys, from over at the Casino entrance, were watching the woman and I arguing.

"I want that eighty grand. Tonight. You can keep Patterson—but I want that money! Understand?" I squeezed her arms, until I left marks on them.

She glared at me with hate in her eyes. "Okay, but you will have to pretend to win it at the tables."

"No, it will take too long. I will buy some chips—have a flutter and when I cash in, you will pay me out with the eighty grand."

She nodded her head and I let her walk off the dance floor.

I caught up to her and said my final words.

"One false move and I'll drill Patterson—that, I promise you," and I opened my jacket and let her see the .38 at my left hip. If looks could kill, I would have been six feet under ground.

Gina, or June Ferguson, as her real name was, moved slowly away from me towards the Casino.

Passion of The East looked petrified.

"Frank—what are you doing?" she whispered.

"Keep out of my way sweetheart," I said. "For the next hour or so, there is a very good chance of trouble. Big trouble. Be a good girl and get on board the next launch ashore," and I ordered a large brandy.

I took my time drinking it. Who knows—it may be the last one I would ever drink!

CHAPTER 9

As I walked across to the door, on which was printed 'Casino', I was met by a crowd of protesting men and women, who were being ushered out of the room by the two gorillas in evening dress.

As the last person came through

the door, only the two gorillas were left—just as they were when I first saw them. One on either side of the door.

I put my left hand on the door to push it open, when suddenly, the gorillas grabbed me. One round the neck, while the other had my left arm.

My right foot instinctively raked down the shin bone of the gorilla who had me in a head lock.

It took two attempts before the pressure was released on my neck, but by then, the other gorilla had my arm up my back as far as it would go. Before breaking point. I did the only thing possible. I dropped forward to ease the pressure on my arm.

The bastard must have expected it, because his left foot came up and hit me in the side. I slumped down in a heap, with my side on fire.

It flashed through my mind, I was not just due for a beating, but that beyond the door, Patterson and the blonde, would be packing away all the money they could lay their hands on.

My right hand was trying to grab the butt of my .38, but I was too slow. A hundred years too slow, because a foot hit me on the right arm paralysing it.

Another foot hit me on the side of my head and I went spinning round and round like a pin-wheel firework, with brightly coloured sparks, shooting across my eyes.

Clever McGrath—the perfect sleuth. Tracks down where the eighty grand is cached, then tells them he is going to take it away. Just like that! Then ends up being kicked to death.

Other blows landed, but the pain was so intense by now, I hardly noticed. So this is how it was.

The big build up to the grand finale. The fifth corpse in the case.

Five was supposed to be my lucky number—so much for luck I thought in my subterranean blacked out brain, when I heard two sharp cracks. They were either my arms breaking, or someone had fired a gun. Who cared? It was cosy in my little black furry hole, so I just curled up and prepared to say Good-bye, to everything I had ever known.

CHAPTER 10

This time, it was five days in a hospital bed. The way I felt, I could have stayed there for ever.

Besides my body feeling broken, my spirit was shattered.

Day and night, a plain clothes man was at my bed side. No questions—no conversation. He was there just to see I was comfortable in bed. Like Hell.

The sixth day, they gave me my clothes and told me to get dressed. This time there were two plain clothes men to watch me.

"Don't worry lads," I told them, "I won't run away from you."

I was not joking. I could hardly

walk. They led me out of the hospital and pushed me into a shiny black patrol car.

They took me to a dreary spartan furnished C.I.D. office, gave me a straight backed chair, told me to sit down, then started to go to work.

"Allright McGrath," said a thick set, bald headed Detective Sergeant, with bags under his eyes. "You are in it—right up to your ears. I'm going to ask you some straight questions—and I want some straight answers—or God help you, I'll have you sent down for so long, you will be drawing your old age pension when you come out."

I had nothing to say to all that, so I just nodded my head.

"Right. Who killed George Henderson?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Who killed Barton and Carter?"

"I don't know," I repeated.

"Did you?" snapped a tall, muscular character, in a smart dark suit.

I later found out he was Detective Inspector Gordon, from Scotland Yard.

I shook my head. "No I did not. I had a fight with them—but they were alive when I left them. That I swear."

"How do you know?" said the bald headed detective, "did you feel their pulse?"

"No I did not," I snarled back, "and I did not stick a knife in them either!"

"Who said anything about a knife?" said Inspector Gordon quietly.

"I read it in the paper," I retorted.

They looked at each other and Gordon nodded his head at the bald headed cop, whose name was Hills.

Hills opened a packet of cigarettes—offered one to Gordon and they both lit up and started smoking.

Hills looked across the table at me, placed the cigarette packet on the table, then said, "Would you care for one?"

"Yes, I would. I haven't had a smoke for six days."

He smiled, a tight lipped smile.

"Well you can have one when you have answered our questions."

I told him what he could do with his cigarettes—one at a time.

Hills' face went a deep red, then white. I never looked at Gordon, but I had a feeling I heard a strangled laugh.

"How did you manage to get in a fight with Barton and Carter?" asked Gordon.

"They laid in wait for me. I never knew who they were. There was no time for introductions. They just jumped me."

"Christ!" Hills said. "They jumped you! Do you expect us to believe that?"

"Look," I snapped. "I helped capture those two hoods five years ago, when you coppers were sat on your fannies, drinking tea."

"That will do," growled Gordon.

"Will it?" I snapped. "Look—if you are going to 'book' me, okay, 'book' me. But get me a lawyer first."

"Why, do you think you need one?" said Hills.

"Need one! Need one! What do you think? Okay, so Henderson dies in my arms. Do you think I would kill him in my own office—then 'phone for the cops? Be your age! And these other killings—the clerk who was killed by a truck. Would I run myself down with a truck first, just to see if it worked? And Barton and Carter. If I had a knife, I would have used it when they jumped me. Or I could have used my gun if I wanted to kill them."

"Oh yes, your gun," said Inspector Gordon. "Have you a licence for it?"

"Yes I have, by the way, where is the gun?"

"We have it," said Hills.

"What did you do with your other gun?" asked Gordon.

"Other gun? What other gun?"

"The gun that killed the two men who were kicking your head in," he answered.

My mind had blurred after going unconscious, what gun were they talking about, what dead men?

"Not some more corpses?" I groaned.

"Oh brother," sneered Hills, "you attract more corpses than a cut rate undertaker."

Gordon moved across the room and leaned over me. "Allright McGrath—one question. If the answer sounds allright, we will let you go."

"Fire away. I can only tell the truth."

"What exactly are you looking for?"

"Give me a cigarette and I will tell you," I grinned.

"Give him one," said Gordon over his shoulder.

Hills got to his feet, gave me a cigarette. Gordon said, "Light it for him."

Hills struck a match and lit the cigarette that was in my mouth.

I noticed his hands were thick, his finger nails were cut short and black hairs were sprouting on the back of his hands.

He blew the match out in my face, as I inhaled the tobacco smoke. The first cigarette for six days. It made me cough and splutter.

They both towered over me.

"We are waiting," said Gordon in a sharp voice.

"Do you mind if I stand up, you make me nervous," I said.

"Stay where you are," said Gordon, "just answer my question. What are you looking for?"

My mind ran back over all the events since George Henderson had telephoned me, that day in a thunder storm."

"I'm looking for George Henderson's killer," I answered.

"Nothing else?" asked Gordon.

"No," I said.

"Liar," snarled Hills.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Please your self."

Gordon began to pace around the room like a lion in a cage.

I got up off the chair, no one stopped me. Hills was halfway round the desk to his chair, when I hit them with it.

"Saw Sam Patterson the other night."

They stopped dead in their tracks.

Gordon turned and faced me.

"Who?" he asked.

"Sam Patterson. I thought he was supposed to be in Parkhurst," I said.

They looked at each other. Hills shook his head. "He still has another two years to serve."

Gordon stared at me. "Are you sure McGrath?"

"That was how I nearly got my head beat in. I was on the 'Caribbean' as you know. I saw him, but he was different. Dyed his hair white, shaved off his moustache, but I recognised him. I was going to grab him when those hoods grabbed me.

Gordon snatched up the telephone and started barking orders into it. "Get moving immediately, then ring me back," were the last words he snapped into the receiver.

My mind must have been addled, or I was dreaming. They did not even know Patterson was out of prison.

"That other gun you were talking about. What did you mean?" I asked them.

Then Gordon levelled with me, told me all they knew.

They had been watching the 'Caribbean' for weeks. Besides operating a gambling racket, who ever owned the 'Caribbean' was organising a high class prostitution racket, right on board the 'Caribbean'.

The police raided the ship just as I was being worked over. They heard the two shots and found me on the floor, with two dead gorillas lay on top of me. Both shot through the head with a Beretta .25.

"A Beretta .25?" I said slowly, "a woman's gun."

"Yes, a woman's gun," said Hills sadly, "except that although we found the gun, all finger prints had been wiped off. All we had to do was question seventy women."

I remembered Passion of The East's handbag. That felt heavy. Heavy enough to have had a Beretta in. If she had a gun, maybe she would have used it. If she did, then she saved my life.

"There was a tall blonde with Patterson. I think she owned the joint," I told them.

"A tall blonde?" said Gordon.

"Yeah— Patterson's girl friend of over five years ago. Her real name is June Ferguson, but she uses the name Gina in Southampton.

I was giving them information they did not know, but I was keeping little Passion out of it. Completely!

The telephone rang, Gordon grabbed it.

"Gordon here. What! Then find out how. Use any means you need. But find out!" And he slammed down the receiver.

He stood motionless for a few seconds, then, as though to no one in particular he said, "Patterson has been out of Parkhurst for over a fortnight. But someone, very much like him, is in his cell—serving his time!"

They told me I could go. I helped myself to another of Hills cigarettes and lit it off the butt I was smoking. I could have stolen the whole packet. They would never have known, they had other things on their minds.

CHAPTER 11

I walked out of the police station. They brought me in a car, but I could walk home on my own. Home! That was a joke.

My head was aching and my arms and legs felt as thought they were being operated by a puppets strings. Perhaps they were.

I felt like jacking it all in and going back to London. I had had enough. Leave it to the cops, they were getting paid for it. Me, I was not even on expenses. And my car? Where was it?

I shuffled along the footpath, people were stopping and staring at me. I must have looked cute with two black eyes and a swollen face.

It's all right folks. It's only McGrath, the broken down private eye. It is his annual holiday. Other people go abroad, or sit by the sea, with the wife and kids—but not McGrath. He has to avenge an old pal's killing and ends up spending all his money on getting his body mangled.

My brain would not function properly, I could not think what I had to do next. Do next? I glanced up from the gutter. I was outside the Ocean Bar. There were shutters over the door and windows. It looked as though the cops had closed it down. Pity they had not closed it down before I got there. It would have saved me a lot of trouble.

Eventually, I remembered where I had left my car, in a car park near the docks.

I hailed a taxi and told the driver to take me on a tour of all the car parks near the docks. He looked at me as though I was a nut, but drove off just the same.

I found the Citreon in the fourth car park.

"Stop here." I told the driver. I paid him his fare and a half-crown tip, then strolled into the car park. I walked around the Citreon. It had all its wheels on and the engine was still under the bonnet.

I took out my keys, opened the door, sat behind the wheel and switched on the ignition. It started at the third attempt. As I drove the Citreon out of the car park and past the astonished cabby, I waved to him. He looked as though he thought I was stealing the car.

I let him think so.

Before I drove back to London, I was going to call and see little Passion of The East, once more. I bought a bunch of flowers and the largest box of chocolates I could find and drove to her flat.

I am not the flowers and chocolates type, but this particular little Oriental beauty had saved my life, besides, I had a soft spot for her.

I felt conspicuous walking along the footpath with the flowers and chocolates. People kept smiling. "Twins mate?" shouted one character after me. I grinned sheepishly and carried on walking.

I remembered her little room, only too well. It was as dainty and feminine as she was.

I walked up the stairs, tapped the door with my toe and shouted, "Hey —Passion. Open up. I have a surprise for you."

But the door was not shut. It moved, ever so slowly, as though pulled by a slender thread.

I stood there with the chocolates in one hand, the flowers in the other, as slowly the opening door revealed more of the room inside.

It also revealed a pair of little feet, peeking around the door, as though their owner lay on the floor.

I moved into the room, my mouth suddenly dry. "Passion?"

The flowers and chocolates fell from my hands when I saw her.

She was sprawled on a white rug that had a dark stain seeping across it. She also had an ornamental dagger in her back.

Slowly I moved her, she was still alive, but only just.

"Passion. It's Frank. Who did this to you?"

"Frank. Glad you came to see me," she whispered.

"Who did it? Who stabbed you?" I asked her.

"He did. He said he would, for helping you."

"Who did?"

"That bad man, Patterson—"

"I'll get an ambulance," I said to her.

"No Frank,—too late. They are at Seven Points, they have hide away —"

And she died in my arms. Just like that. Have you ever cried? Well I did, in that little room, that day in August.

Slowly, I pulled out the knife from her body, laid her carefully on her bed and covered her over with a sheet.

I blew my nose, looked around the small room, then walked out, softly closing the door behind me.

I found a telephone box, rang the police and asked for Inspector Gordon. I told him about finding little Passion, explained that she told me that Patterson was the killer. I was going to Seven Points. If they wanted Patterson, they would have to move fast as I was on my way, and hung up.

All the way I kept my foot down hard on the gas pedal. I was sorry I had told Gordon about Seven Points, he may get there before me.

Seven Points was a bleak land mark, high on the Sussex Hills. I saw it high in the distance as I began the drive up the long narrow winding approach road.

Somewhere in the sky, I heard a noise, I glanced up and saw a helicopter. It was tailing me.

Gordon was no fool, he had got straight on to the R.A.F and brorowed one of their choppers.

The road was so steep I had to change down to second gear.

There was no wall on the left side off the road, just two hundred foot drop on to the rocks below. I steered well away from the edge as I kept my eyes peeled for a sign of life. Patterson was up here somewhere—and I was going to kill him. If it was the last thing I ever did.

The smoke gave him away. Perhaps he never expected Passion to live long enough to tell anyone where his hide-out was.

The smoke was curling out from the top of some tall, wind swept, Beech trees, then it would be sucked away by the wind, which always blew up there, over 600 ft. above sea level.

I went as far as I could with the car, then left it parked across the road. One road up, one road down, and if my car was blocking it, no one could pass.

I pushed my ignition key under a large stone by the side of the road and began to run up the dirt track to where the smoke was spiralling through the trees.

The chopper was swooping around over head, like an angry giant wasp.

Then I saw the building, an old Army wooden hut, in a clearing amidst the trees. I also saw a face at a window peering up to the sky at the helicopter. It was the blonde.

Outside the hut was parked a Vauxhall estate car, with several suitcases in the back. Patterson came running out with another case, which he slung down on the passenger seat. He sat behind the steering wheel as the blonde ran out after him. She tried to open the door, but he pushed her in the face and she fell back in the dirt.

He shouted something at her, I could not make out what it was, but it shocked the woman.

I ran across the clearing towards them, as the car started to move forward.

The woman was screaming at Patterson as he drove away.

I missed him by seconds, his car engine was roaring, but I still ran after him down the dirt track, the blonde stumbling after me. It was about a one in twelve gradient and the way the car moved, he must have changed up into top gear.

He shot away from me down the narrow, steep, winding road.

Then I heard the screeching of tyres as he swung round the sharp bend and saw my car.

It was impossible to stop, so he tried to squeeze through between my car and the edge of the road.

One second the car was on the road, the next second it was airbourne, as it shot over the sharp edge.

It was like slow motion the way the car slowly turned over in mid air.

Over and over and over—then it hit a large rock, the doors burst open as the car ploughed down the steep slope, scattering the cases across the hillside.

A giant Oak tree stopped it going any further. There was a piercing scream, as the car almost disintegrated before my eyes, then a loud explosion as the petrol tank blew up.

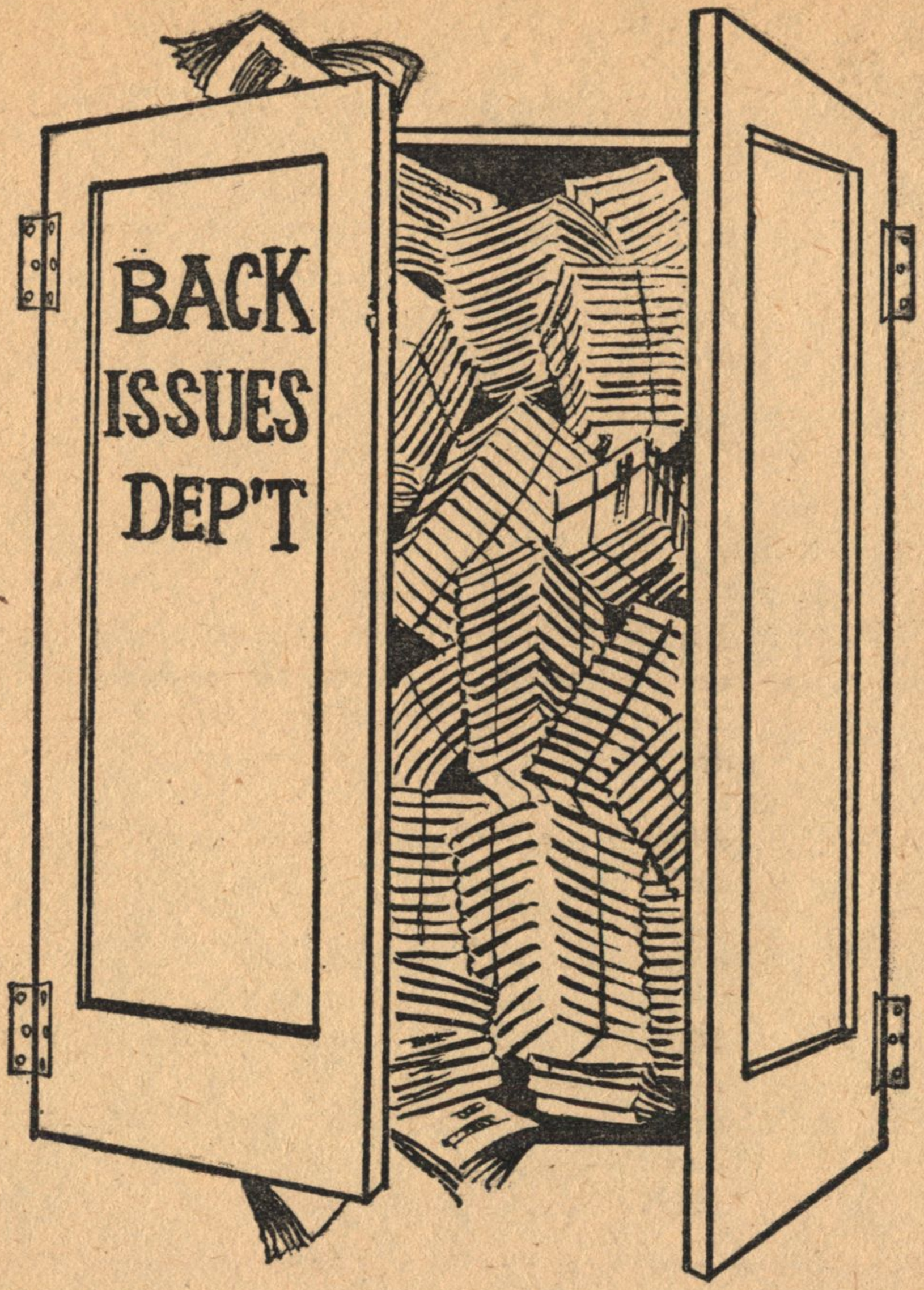
I stood there and watched it burn. Floating down the valley were pieces of paper, thousands of them, which were being blown out of the smashed suitcases. The pieces of paper were pound notes.

Eventually, I turned round and walked back up the hill to meet the police, as their helicopter landed.

The woman was crouched on her knees sobbing. I walked past her as though she did not exist.

In a hedge was a Blackbird feeding its young. No matter what happens, life goes on.

I wonder when mine will begin again!



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He'd taken a fall for five years. But it was worth it. There was fifty grand waiting for him . . . and his son. With fifty grand he could get his son far away from the rackets.

THE FIFTY GRAND STRETCH

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY RICHARD MARSTEN

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I HELD Tigo against the wall with one fist bunched into the front of his shirt, and with his spit falling down over his lips and jaw and trailing onto my hand.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

Tigo shook his head, with his eyes blue and wide, and streaked with bloodshot cobwebs.

"Where is he, Tigo? Tell me where he is."

Tigo started to shake his head again, and this time I helped him a little. I gave him the back of my knuckles, hard, splitting his cheek and mixing a little blood with his spit. His head rocked over to one side, and a wash of sweat spilled from his straight black hair.

"You were supposed to take care of him, Tigo. All right, you didn't. Now all I want to know is where is he? Either that, or we play the game, Tigo, only we play it harder."

"Danny, I'm your brother-in-law, your own . . ."

"Where is he, Tigo?"

"It's not my fault your sister left me, Danny. You can't blame that on me. I watched the kid good."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, Danny."

I hit him again, only this time it wasn't my knuckles. This time it was my bunched fist, and it collided with the bridge of his nose, and his eyes began to water and blood spilled from his nostrils in a steady stream, warm with the heat of his body.

"Danny . . ."

"Where, Tigo?"

His eyes held the opaque stare of someone who's been on heroin for a long time, and I thought of the kid and cursed my rotten sister for walking out and leaving him with this lump. I hit Tigo again, and he screamed like a woman in childbirth, and the sweat stood out on his face in giant shimmering globules. He moved his lips, and I was ready to start on his teeth next when he began to blubber.

"Don't hit me again, Danny. Lay off, please, lay . . ."

I drew back my fist and his eyes went blank with fright.

"No!" he screamed. "No, I'll tell you. I'll tell you, Danny."

"Fast."

"The broad," he gasped.

"What broad?"

"Connie. Connie." He was gasping for breath, and I still held the front of his shirt, and my fist was still cocked.

"Connie? What do you mean, Connie? You know what you're saying, you bastard?"

"Connie Blaine. I swear, Danny."

"You're a liar, Tigo. You're a lying bastard."

I pulled back my fist, ready to really let him have it this time, and he started screaming like an animal.

"I'm telling the truth, Danny. He's with Connie Blaine. Danny, this is the goods. Danny, I swear. Danny, I wouldn't snow you, not you, Danny. Danny . . ."

"Shut up!"

"Danny . . ."

"Shut up, Tigo."

He stopped blubbering, and I held his shirt in my fist and thought for a few minutes, and then I asked, "How long has this been going on?"

"A year or so. Danny, I watched him good, like my own son, I swear. But Connie . . ."

"Connie Blaine? My kid, with Connie Blaine?"

"He ain't such a kid, Danny. He must be twenty-one now. He . . ."

"Where does Nick fit in?"

"Nick?"

"Don't play dummy, Tigo. Where does Nick fit the picture? Don't tell me he's going to sit with his thumb in his nose while a kid like Johnny plays house with his broad. Where does he fit?"

"I guess they busted maybe. Nick and Connie, I guess they did."

"Don't make me laugh." I paused and said, "Where's her pad?"

"You ain't going there, are you, Danny? Jesus, if they find out I told you . . ."

"Where's her pad?"

"Danny . . ."

"Tigo, if you want your teeth, tell me where she shacks. Tell me damned fast, Tigo, or you'll be chewing with your gums."

He considered this for two seconds, and then he told me. I left him slouched against the wall, and I went looking for Connie Blaine.

She was the same Connie, better if anything. She opened the door, and she was wearing silk lounging pajamas, and the pajamas didn't try to hide one line of her body, and neither did Connie. With some broads, a man acts like a tonic, any man. It was that way with Connie. When opened the door and saw it was a man, she sucked her stomach in flat and threw out her chest, and the naked nipples under the pajama top punched harsh holes in the silk. Her hand went unconsciously to her hair, patted it, and she said, "Danny, I've been expecting you."

"I'll bet. Where is he?"

"Where's who?"

I started in, and she moved to one side, leaving me just enough room to get by, I got by, brushing against her, and I smelled the heavy sensuous perfume on her. Her hair was black and tousled, and her brows were the same black, the black of pitch. Her eyes were half-closed, and she always looked as if she'd come straight from a haystack. She closed the door and walked to a low end table, leaning over to spear a cigarette from the container there. Her pajamas tightened across her back. I went through the apartment fast, and found nothing. When I came back, she had the cigarette going.

"Where's the kid?" I asked.

"Your son, you mean?"

"My son, I mean."

She blew out a cloud of smoke, looked at me through it, and said, "How should I know?"

"I've been hearing things, Connie."

"Like what?"

"Like you and Nick are on the rocks. Like my son's climbed into the saddle. I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"You know why not, baby. Don't give me the big blue-eyed stare. you know why not."

"Johnny's a big boy now, mister. He chooses his own playmates."

"And I don't like the playmates he chooses."

"He does. He likes it fine."

"I can imagine. It must be real professional."

"Look, Danny, if you came here to be insulting . . ."

"I came here to find Johnny. He's just a kid, and I don't want him messing with you or with the company you keep."

"He's twenty-one. That's old enough to vote, buster, and it ain't such a kid. It ain't a kid at all."

"A little hair under the armpits don't make a man. Where is he?"

"How the hell should I know? You're such a big-shot, you find him."

I glared at her, and we were both

silent for a moment, and then she smiled, an arch smile that curved her full lips.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Fine," I said. "Just like a vacation."

"I'll bet."

"It was. A vacation with pay. Five years, just like Nick said. Not bad at all." I paused. "I took the rap, Connie. I didn't mind. Fifty grand is a lot of loot for a small stretch."

"And now you're back."

"Now I'm back. I had the vacation, and now I want the pay."

"So talk to Nick. He's the man with the bankroll."

"I'll get to him. In the meantime, keep clear of Johnny."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like the idea of coming straight from rock-breaking and finding him Christ knows where. I don't like it at all. I busted my back to keep him away from all this junk, and he's not going to get poisoned by it now."

"You're the one to talk, all right."

"You bet I'm the one to talk. I'm the one to talk because I'm in it up to my nostrils, and it stinks. But it's not going to touch him. I've got fifty grand coming from Nick. I'm going to send the kid away with that and . . ."

"Stop calling him a kid, goddamnit!"

". . . and if you try to swing your hips into this, you're liable to wake up with something broken."

"You're scaring me, Danny."

I smiled. "Nick's a big man, huh? Is that what you're thinking? Baby, Nick can't watch you all the time. All I need is a few minutes. So steer clear of Johnny."

"I steer where I want to. No two-bit punk is going to direct my kicks."

"Where is he now?"

"Where's *who* now?"

"Johnny. You know damn well who . . ."

"If you think he's here, have another look." She laughed, a short malicious laugh. I glared at her and then went through the place with a fine comb. When I was finished, she said, "You satisfied?"

It was an obscene suggestion, the way she said it.

I turned my back on her and walked out.

Nick Trenton seemed glad to see me. He extended a beefy paw and took my hand in his, pumping it hard. He was a big boy, Nick, with a round face and heavy shoulders and chest. There was a time when a shoulder holster spoiled the cut of his three-hundred dollar suits. No more now. Now Nick hired his guns. He also hired his fall guys, and I'd been one of them, and I wanted my fifty grand now.

"You look good, Danny," he told me. "A little pale, but otherwise fine."

I grinned tightly and said, "I found a home at Sing Sing."

Nick laughed, a good clean boom-

ing laugh. "They say you keep your sense of humor, and you're all right. Yessir, Danny, it doesn't seem to have hurt you one bit."

"Not a bit." I paused. "There's a little matter, Nick."

"Ah yes, the little matter."

"A little matter of fifty G's. You remember."

"I remember, Danny," Nick said. "A man don't forget fifty G's so easy, nosir. I remember, and I'm grateful as hell. A man does something for me, and it's appreciated."

I smiled. "Fine," I said. "Let's see the color of your appreciation."

Nick laughed aloud again, and his belly shook under his tailor-made suit. He walked around behind his desk, and opened the top drawer. He pulled out a narrow black book, threw it on the desk top, and then reached for a pen.

"A check all right?" he asked.

"No," I said.

Nick looked surprised. "Danny, my check's as good as gold."

"I know. I prefer the gold."

"Danny, Danny." He chuckled a little, softly this time. "I don't keep that kind of dough around. Why won't you take a check?"

"Because maybe I'll never get to the bank with it. Maybe I'll never get to cash it, and it's a simple thing to stop a check—especially when the payee is dead."

Nick shrugged. "What's the difference? I mean, okay, you don't trust me." He shrugged again. "But if I was going to have you cooled, I could do it even if I paid cash. I mean, a dead man don't put up a fight when someone goes through his pockets."

"I know. That's why I want it in savings bonds."

"What?"

"Savings bonds. United States Government Savings Bonds. All in capital letters, Nick. Fifty grand worth. With my son as beneficiary."

Nick studied me for a moment and then nodded. "How'd you figure that one out?"

"I had a long time to think about it."

"Well, if you want the bonds, I'll get them. But it'll take a little while."

"No time at all," I told him. "You can send a man to the bank now. I'll come back later."

"You really *don't* trust me, do you?"

"Not a bit, Nick. Not one goddamn bit."

Nick smiled. "You should have thought of that before you took the rap."

"I should have, but I didn't. I should have been paid in advance. A man can't think of everything, Nick. I'm doing all my thinking now."

"Sure." Nick smiled. "You got nothing to worry about, anyway. Nick Trenton never welshes. You come back at about six, Danny. I'll have the bonds for you then."

"With Johnny as beneficiary, don't forget."

"I won't forget."

"One other item, Nick."

"What's that?"

"Where's Johnny now?"

Nick smiled and shrugged. "How should I know?"

I tried to figure it.

I tried to figure why a broad who'd tumbled with every big wheel in the racket would give a second look to a kid like Johnny. I tossed it around, and I came up with zero each time, so I let it drop. I let it drop, and I searched the city for a kid I hadn't seen in five years.

He'd been sixteen when I went away, and the courts had awarded him to my closest female relative, my sister. She'd been okay then, and Tigo'd been a fairly good man. But times had changed, and Christ alone knew where she was, and Tigo had a habit as long as my arm. So now the kid was somewhere in the jungle of the city, only he wasn't such a kid anymore. He was big enough to play with Connie Blaine, and that's pretty damned big. Only why?

I started hitting the bars, figuring I'd pick up the word in one of them. Nobody knew, or if they knew, they weren't saying. In the fifth bar, I ran into Hannigan.

He stood there with one foot hooked on the rail, and with a shot glass in front of him on the bar. He looked just the way he'd looked five years ago, but maybe cops never change.

I walked over to the bar, and he said, "Well, if it ain't."

"It ain't," I told him. I turned to Mike, the bartender, and said, "A double whiskey."

"How was the trip?" Hannigan asked.

"Nice. I missed you."

"Wished I was there, huh?" Hannigan laughed mirthlessly. He was a big cop, and a tough one, and I think he was still sore about my taking the rap. He'd hauled Nick in, anxious to slap him behind bars, and then I'd come along with my story and full confession, and that left Hannigan with an empty sack. I'd had reasons, though, and you don't explain reasons to a cop. When a kid's mother is gone and his old man is in the rackets, you got to be careful. Fifty grand can help you be very careful. That fifty grand was going to keep the kid away from the slime.

Mike brought the whiskey, and I downed it.

"When's the payoff?"

"What payoff, cop?"

"You know, Danny. Fifty grand, ain't it? The rumble's out."

"The rumble's wrong. Nobody's getting paid for anything."

"That may be truer than you think."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, ignoring his meaning.

"You clean, Danny?" Hannigan asked.

"Try me," I said.

Hannigan stood up, stretched, and then began frisking me.

"You know," I said, "I think you get a charge out of this, Hannigan.

I think frisking is just an excuse with you."

"Go to hell," he told me.

"I'm not heeled. You can relax."

Hannigan fished into my pocket. "No? What's this?"

"For paring my nails. Any law against that?"

"It depends. How long is the blade?"

"Under four inches." I smiled. "You want to measure it?"

"I'll take your word, Danny."

"Thanks."

Hannigan climbed back onto the bar stool and was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Your son . . ."

"What about my son?"

"Don't put up your guard, goddamnit. I know what you're trying to do for him, and I admire it. That's the only thing I *do* admire about you."

"So?"

"So it'd be a shame if everything you're trying to do goes down the drain."

"What do you mean, cop?"

"Stories, Danny. Stories that the kid is turning into a cheap hood. Stories that he's already done some gun jobs for Nick Trenton. Stories that . . ."

"Shut up, cop."

"Stories that Connie Blaine's got him wrapped up. All she does is wiggle her backside and the kid would gun his own grandmother."

"Shut up, I said!"

"Stories like that."

"Keep your stories, and shove off. I like to choose my drinking companions."

"Sure. But you're liable to be mighty surprised, Danny."

"I don't need any advice from you, Hannigan."

"I'm not offering any, smart guy. But remember that I'm going to get Nick Trenton some day, and there won't be another sucker around to sub for him next time. I'm going to get him no matter who's in the way. I hope your son isn't."

"Don't worry. He won't be."

"We'll see."

"We'll see. So long, cop."

Hannigan left, and I hung around a while and then covered the other joints I could think of. Before I knew it, it was six o'clock, so I hurried over to Nick's pad. He lived in an ornate joint, with a dozen elevators in the lobby and a pile of uniformed jokers running them. I took a car up to the twelfth floor and then walked down to the end of the hall and pressed the stud in the door jamb. I heard three chimes sound inside, and then the door opened.

Connie Blaine opened it.

She was dressed to kill this time, wearing black silk that dipped low over her full breasts. She smiled and said, "You're late, Danny."

"A little. I didn't know there was going to be a party."

"Come on in."

I followed her into the apartment and into Nick's den. He was sitting

behind his desk when I came in, and he stood and walked over to me and shook my hand.

"Right on time, eh, Danny?" he said, smiling.

"A little late, Connie tells me."

Nick beamed. "You can never be too late when fifty G's is involved. Ain't that right, Danny?" He kept smiling, and I didn't like the smile or the way his eyes didn't match his mouth. I watched him, and I said nothing.

"You want the bonds, I guess," he said.

"You guess right."

"Well, no sense wasting time, is there?" He walked around to his desk, and opened the top drawer again. This time he came out with a sheaf of bonds, and he dropped them on the desk top and said, "There they are, boy. Nick Trenton never welshes."

I smiled and walked over to the desk, leafing through the bonds. It was all there, fifty grand worth.

"Okay?" Nick asked. The smile hadn't left his face.

"So far," I said. I slipped one of the bonds out from under the rubber band and I examined it more closely. My hand shook a little, and I felt the sweat break out on my brow.

"What are you trying to pull, Nick?"

"Pull? What's wrong, Danny? Something wrong?"

"You know damn well what's wrong. I told you to make Johnny beneficiary."

"Didn't they? I told them to . . ."

"You're listed as beneficiary, Nick. Beneficiary, Nick Trenton. What's the idea?"

Nick shook his head. "A stupid mistake. You just can't trust these banks, can you, Danny?"

"You're dumber than I thought, Nick," I said.

"Really?" he was smiling again, and the smile burned me.

"This is about as obvious as a rivet. You keep your bargain, but I get cooled the second I step out of here, and the fifty grand goes back to you. You must think the police are meatheads."

Nick stopped smiling, and his eyes narrowed with a crafty look. "Can I help it if you like me and list me as beneficiary? And can I help it if you have an accident? Can I . . ."

"Look, Nick . . ."

"No, you look, stupid. You think I'm going to do the gunning? You think the police will be able to pin anything on me?"

"Let's get this over," Connie said.

"You're playing in the wrong league, punk," Nick said tightly. He smiled again, and added, "I'm really doing you a favor, Danny. A punk is liable to flip his wig over so much cabbage. I'm saving you a trip to the nut hou . . ."

I reached over the desk and grabbed Nick's lapels with one hand. I brought the other hand back and forward before he had a chance to move, catching him on the jaw and rocking his head back. He was

out before I hit him the second time, but I followed through anyway and then let his lapels go. He flopped to the rug like a dead whale, and I scooped up the bonds and turned to Connie.

"Tell your boyfriend I'm going to the bank now. Tell him these bonds'll be cashed before he comes to. Tell him he can whistle then."

"You're not going anyplace," the voice said.

It was not a familiar voice. I turned rapidly and saw the open door to the right of Nick's desk. I saw the figure standing in the doorway, and then my eyes dropped to the .45 in the guy's fist.

My eyes moved up slowly to the guy's face.

It had changed. It had been boyish the last time I'd seen it, with rounded cheeks, with peach fuzz, with an innocent smile. It had narrowed now, sharpened with maturity. The lips were thin, and a heavy shadow had replaced the peach fuzz. The cheeks were hollow, and the mouth was unsmiling, and the eyes held me most of all, because the eyes were hard and glittering.

"Hello, pop," Johnny said. He said "pop" bitterly, as if the word burned his tongue.

"Johnny . . ."

"Don't move, pop. Don't move a goddamn inch."

"Put that gun up, Johnny. What the hell do you think . . ."

"Shut up!"

"You surprised, Danny? Connie said. She stood beside me, and she smiled triumphantly, and her breasts heaved in excitement. "You surprised, you bastard?"

"Look . . ."

"Tell your son what you told me this afternoon. Go ahead. Tell him what a tramp I am. Tell him all about it. Go ahead." She turned to Johnny. "Listen to him, Johnny. Listen to the bastard talk about me."

"I don't have to hear anything, Connie," he said.

I looked at him, and I was looking at a stranger, and I tried to think of all the things that had happened to him in five years. Connie Blaine had happened to him, and that could have been enough.

"Johnny," I said, "put up that gun. I'm your father. I'm . . ."

"You're a punk," he said. "You're a punk who got suckered into taking a bum rap. That's all you are. A step above Tigo. Good old Uncle Tigo."

"Johnny, for Christ's sake, can't you see what they're trying to pull? Can't you see that you'll be the fall guy? The way I was? The way . . ."

"You don't think Connie's good for me, huh? A punk like you making decisions, huh? That's a laugh."

"Johnny, I've got fifty G's. We can get away from here. We can . . ."

"Get away from Connie? Leave her? You've got a hole in your head, old man."

I looked at Johnny's face, and I

saw the eyes, and they were the eyes of someone who'd killed before. They were the eyes of everything I'd tried to keep him from, and it was too late now because the kid had pulled a real switch on the old man who'd tried like hell to keep him away from it. He'd turned into a real killer, and that was a big laugh. Except that it wasn't funny because his knuckle was turning white around the trigger, and I thought, *Christ, he's rotten.*

The knowledge made me a little sick, but there was no time for crying and no time for thinking. There was only time to grab Connie. I yanked her wrist and whirled her around in front of me, and then the .45 exploded.

She screamed when the slug tore into her chest, and then she dropped to the rug and Johnny's face went white with hatred. I ran across the room, yanking the knife from my pocket as he brought the .45 up again.

I pressed the stud, and the switch blade snapped open, and it was only three-and-a-half inches long, and that didn't make it a dangerous weapon as far as the police were concerned. I was close to him now, and I looked into those eyes once more, and I saw everything I had to know there, all the slime and all the filth, and the rotten road that ended bleeding in a gutter.

I ducked under his arm, and the .45 went off close to my head, and I smelled the stench of cordite, and then I brought the switch knife up and sank it into his gut. I twisted the knife and then slashed it across his middle and up and across the other way, and his face tightened in pain, and he screamed, "You punk bastard, *and I knew I was* doing the right thing.

His eyes went blank then, and the killer light went out of them as he fell to the rug. I yanked the knife clear of his body, and there were tears in my eyes and I couldn't see too well, but I went to where Nick Trenton lay unconscious, and I kicked him in the head to make sure, and then lugged him out from behind the desk.

I called Hannigan then.

When he got there, my eyes were dry.

The bonds were in my jacket pocket, and my knife was in Nick Trenton's fist.

"I figure they got into a fight over the broad," I said.

"This is the way you found them, huh, Danny?"

"Yes."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry about your son, Danny. I . . ."

"Skip it, Hannigan."

"Sure."

Hannigan stooped down near Nick and said, "He's going to be mighty surprised when he wakes up. This is the end of him."

"I know."

Hannigan looked at the blood-smeared knife in Nick's fist.

A look of recognition crossed his face, and then he lifted his head and stared at me for a few minutes, saying nothing.

He did not mention the knife when he stood up and walked to the phone.

He simply said, "I'll call headquarters. They'll want to come down for Trenton."

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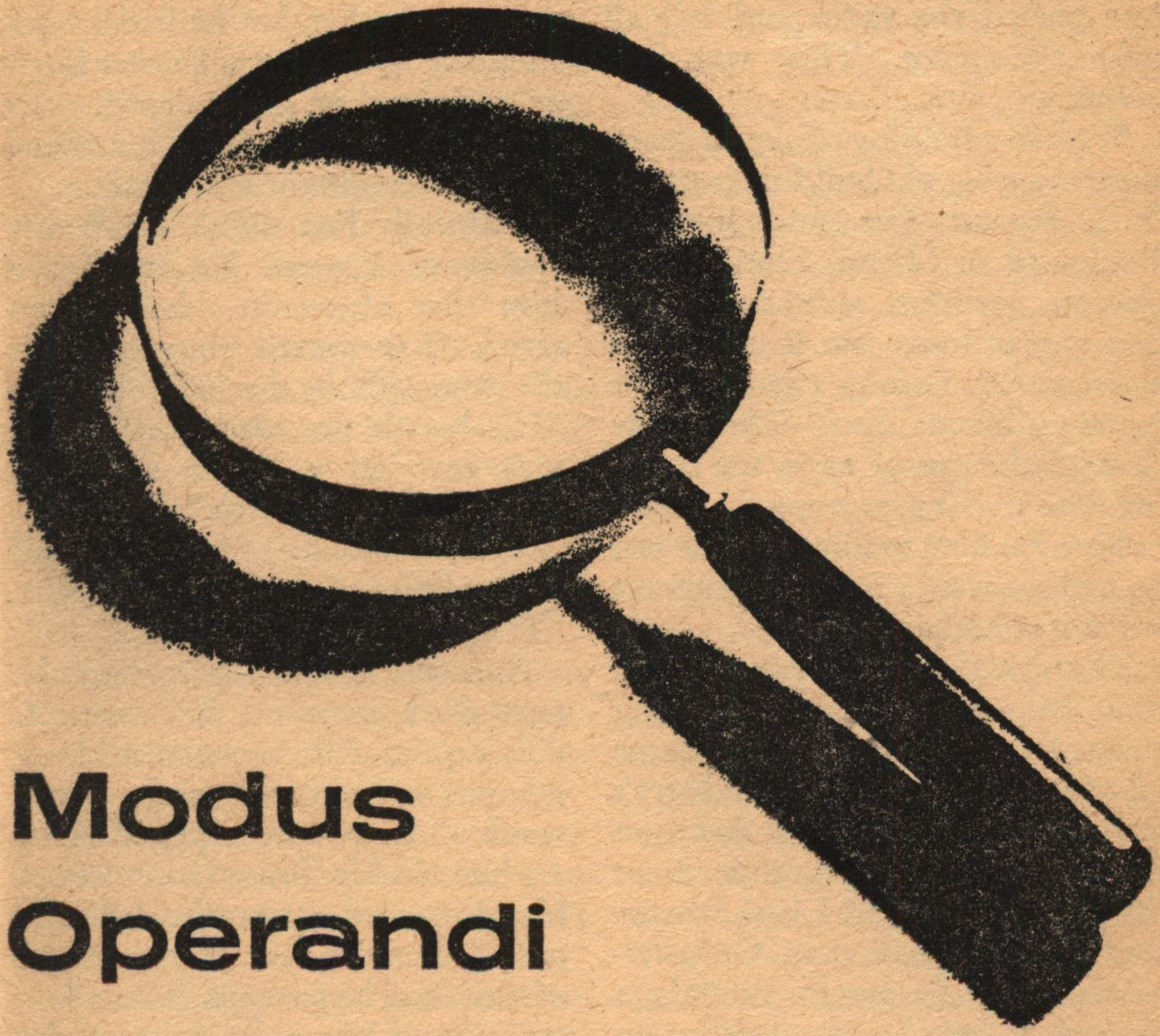
Pop Albury was an amateur sleuth. My next-door neighbor was a mean, suspicious-looking man . . . and he was grist for Pop's mill.



Modus Operandi

BY EDWARD Y. BREESE

My next door neighbor was a mean man, with a broken nose and a hard lipped smile to prove it. He went in and out of the halls as silently as a snake in wet grass and never gave even a 'hello' to any of us.

The only time anyone ever heard him was when he got drunk. That was when he opened the windows and turned the radio up as loud as it would go. After two or three days of steady drinking he started falling down. He was a big man, and when he hit the walls or floor of the apartment it was with a slamming, jar-

ring thud that there was no mistaking. He never sang or shouted. He never came next door to talk. He just played the radio and fell all over the place. This was bad enough.

We had adjoining efficiency apartments in a big old building between N.E. Second Ave. and Biscayne Boulevard in Miami, Florida. The close-in northeast side wasn't the best part of town, but it wasn't the worst either. Benson (that was the name on his mailbox) didn't really fit with the rest of us in the building. Not that it ever seemed to bother him. He kept to himself. The fact he had no visible means of support was not our affair.

The day the police came to get him Benson had been drinking again. I know because I was home all afternoon. It was Pop Albury's day off at the gas station down on the corner of Second Avenue. Since the holdup Pop and I had become better friends than ever. On afternoons off he frequently brought a six-pack of beer by my place for an hours-long 'jawbone session.' Later on I would broil up a couple of steaks on the miniature electric stove which was all the landlord provided.

Pop was a wonderful talker. All his life he had been interested. By that I don't mean interested in any one thing or line. Pop was interested in everything and everybody that could possibly claim to be worthy of attention. "The old Greeks," he said once, "Would say my tastes were ecumenical." He could handle that sort of word.

Not only that, but he had a heart as big as all outdoors. I never knew a 'straighter' or more decent man. It was a privilege to be his friend and a pleasure to hear him talk.

Naturally Pop didn't think very highly of Benson. He mentioned him that afternoon when he arrived. "Just passed your neighbor the werewolf in the hall," he said. "His breath preceded him and he was carrying a paper sack that clinked with every step."

"Think nothing of it," I said, and relieved him of the beer he brought. "You probably did the same."

A couple of hours later the radio next door came on full force. It didn't quite rattle 'September Morn' off its nail on the wall, but I wouldn't have been surprised. After a while old Mr. Brown came out of his apartment across the hall and pounded on the door. It was a waste of time, and he gave up. After about ten minutes the radio went off for no apparent reason.

Some time after that Benson fell down with a heavy crash that did shake the picture. "Now I'm in for it for at least three days," I said. Pop was busy dissecting the latest theory on UFO's, and paid no attention to me. I was used to that. I was beginning to get hungry, so I looked at my watch. It was just 4:42 PM. I decided to put the steaks on in another hour.

Just as I was finally ready to put them on, the police cruiser pulled up in front of the building. There was no siren, but the blue flasher reflected off the rain slicked streets. As usual in Sunny Florida it had been pouring. The thermometer stood at 98, which I assumed was the usual one point lower than the humidity index.

I heard the cops come upstairs and rap on Benson's door. For a wonder, he opened up, and there was a mutter of voices. After that there was a knock on my own door. When Pop answered, our friendly neighborhood prowl car jockey was standing there.

"Could you fellows come next door for a minute?" he asked. "Lt. Ryan would like to ask a couple of questions."

I was surprised I hadn't spotted Ryan when he came in, though he'd been hunched down under his straw hat against the rain. He was one of the really smart boys in the Miami Homicide division. I knew then they wanted Benson for more than a barroom brawl or even an ordinary mugging.

When we stepped in Benson was sitting on the unmade bed in pants and underwear singlet. Ryan loomed (that's the word) over him. The room was a modified mess. A half filled glass and an old fashion wind-up alarm clock, minus its bell, were on the bedside table. A rum bottle, a smashed ash tray complete with ashes, a skillet that had contained scrambled eggs, and Mr. B's bright red and green sport shirt decorated the floor. For some reason the rug had been pushed under the bed. Benson had a breath and his usual mean expression. His face was half a day overdue for a shave.

"This character," Lt. Ryan told us, "Claims he has been right here at home all afternoon. Would you know anything about it?"

"He came into the building when I did at just about two o'clock." Pop volunteered.

"It isn't two o'clock we're interested in," Ryan said. "At exactly 4:45 this afternoon somebody stuck up the small loan office eight blocks north of here on Second Avenue and walked out with seventy-five hundred clams, more or less. He had on a stocking mask but one of the girls thought she knew him. He shot her. When the manager objected, he shot him too. The manager's dead, but the girl is going to make it O.K. She named this lad. Said she recognized his twisted nose where the stocking pulled tight against it."

"Is that an identification?" Pop asked.

"If he wasn't right here at 4:45, we're going to make it one," was the answer. "We've had tough guy, here before. He's got a record that fits this sort of job right to a capital T."

"I hate to do this," I said. "I truly hate to do it, but in all honesty I've got to back his alibi. When this one drinks he falls down hard. I know that sound because I've heard it too

much. I heard it again today just about 4:45. We heard him working the radio about then too."

"Ha. I tole ya." The drunk laughed. At least I presume he laughed. It was like the caw of a crow, but there must have been amusement in there somewhere.

"That's tough," said one policeman. "You sure you heard him?"

"We heard something hit the floor hard in here." Pop backed me up.

"You tell 'em, Gram'paw." Benson said.

Pop got mad. "Shut up," he said, "And don't call me grandpa. I'm no kin of yours; nor friend either." He was walking around the room, and now he opened the closet door and looked in.

"You get out of my things, Gram-'paw. You ain't no cop."

"He's got a point there," Lt. Ryan said. "Besides we've already searched this place. If there's a gun in here, he's swallowed it. No money either . . ."

Benson had gotten to his feet and stood looking blowsy, swaying a bit on his feet and scratching himself under the left arm. "Well, what ya gonna do?" truculently. "You gonna book me, or get outta here?"

Ryan looked at him. "We won't book you just yet," he said. "Not with these fellows saying what they do. But don't get any idea you're clear, and don't leave town. I think maye we'll have you yet. Now (to us) let's all get out of here."

Benson started to put on his shirt. "I'm going too. Better get somepin to eat, if I'm gonna sober up." He went with us. Pop was the last one out, and he turned to pull the door shut. I noticed that both hinges and lock were perfectly silent. In our building where almost everything had been left to rust in the all-pervasive Miami damp that was highly unusual.

When they had gone down the stairs Pop turned to me in the hall. "What do you think about that feller, Johnny?"

"I think he's guilty," I said. "For one thing he walked down the stairs just now too straight and easy for a man as drunk as we're supposed to think he is."

"So you noticed that too. Did you also see how his door's been oiled so he could slip in without us hearing?"

"I did, but that in itself is no proof of anything."

Pop snorted. "I'm going to find proof. That Lieutenant should have nailed him right now before he gets to run. I think it can be done, and I aim to do it the way it should be done."

"You've been reading too many detective magazines, Pop."

"No, Johnny, I haven't. I just mean to use my brains to prove an honest man can out-think a crook, if he really sets himself to do it."

"Then," I said, "How about thinking us back through the locked door to that apartment."

He laughed. "One ahead of you,

Johnny . . . When I closed the door I stuck a match book cover between the jamb and the latch. All I have to do is give her a push. Like this, see?"

I saw. We went back into the apartment and pulled the door to behind us, but left the latch off. Like my own efficiency it was just one big room about twenty feet square with a closet, a separate bath, and a minimum of furniture. An alcove at one side held the small stove and electric refrigerator that passed for a kitchen. The place wasn't unusual in any way.

"Where do we start now, Pop?" I asked.

"I don't know about you, Johnny, but I aim to start right here." He tapped his forehead. "I'm going to start by thinking how I could frame up an alibi right here in this room. Then I'm going to do it. When I've done that, I'll have proved how he did it. Then I'll just have to call that big cop back and show him what he should have seen for himself. With the evidence that the alibi was a phoney he can get a confession."

"That's real interestin', Gram'paw." We jumped. I just about came out of my shoes. We'd forgotten to watch the door of course, and with the hinges oiled Benson had slipped back in like a shadow. We couldn't get out past him, and to me he looked nine feet tall and meaner than an Everglades wild boar.

"I should have thought of that," Pop said.

"Yeah. For a great thinker like you claim to be, you sure slipped on this one." He gave that awful laugh again.

"We'll get out," I said as placatingly as I could.

"Don't rush off now. Before you-all go I want to hear Gram'paw prove how I ain't got no alibi."

I tried. "Now see here, you can't . . ."

"I can't do a lot of things," Benson said. "But if Gram'paw don't do like I say, I CAN twist his head off and throw it out the window. Now talk."

Surprisingly enough, Pop gave no sign of showing fight. "I'll do it," he said, "Just to show I am smarter than you. But don't you call me grandpa."

"First of all," he said, "We heard the radio go off and on. Let's see about that."

I began to get angry. "Get away from that door," I said. "With the police already after you, you're in no position to beat anybody up."

"What have I got to lose?" he asked.

Once again Pop backed him up. "Believe him, Johnny, he's got nothing to lose. Just for now we better go along with what he wants."

"That's using your head," Benson said. He didn't relax a bit.

Pop took the center of the stage again. He had been bending over the radio and twiddling the dials as he examined it closely. "Just as I thought," he said. "This is one of

the expensive sets with a clock and alarm built in. It can be set to turn on and off at any time the owner wants. All he had to do before he went out was decide when he wanted us to hear the music and set it to play for fifteen minutes or so. Lot's of people like to wake up to music these days."

I was still more worried than impressed. Pop might prove the alibi to be no good, but what then?? The better job he did, the angrier Benson would be. I began to hope he couldn't prove anything. Otherwise, sooner or later, we would have to fight our way out of there. As Pop went on talking I looked around the room for anything I could use for a weapon. I couldn't see anything that looked effective.

"On the other hand," Pop continued. "The radio itself doesn't prove much of anything. It's the noise of him falling down in here that makes the real alibi. He couldn't put that on the radio. Besides we felt the floor shake from next door. That means something pretty darn heavy actually did hit the floor in here."

"Now you're using your noodle, Gram'paw."

Pop chose to ignore the interruption. "So I've got to find something heavy enough to make that noise, AND then prove how it could be fixed to make it just at the time the loan office was being held up. It's not enough to know it was done. I have to show just HOW it was."

He walked around the main room and the bath; looking carefully at every piece of furniture. Then he opened the door of the one closet. Benson was no fancy dresser. On the hangers were a sport jacket, badly in need of dry-cleaning, a couple of pairs of slacks, a cheap dark wool suit and a heavy overcoat. The two latter he must have worn when he came down from the north. On the floor was a pair of run-over black dress shoes. There was a brown felt hat and a tumble of dust-rags on the shelf. Standing against the closet wall were a broom, a mop and a heavy wooden ironing board to match the ones in my own closet. The management supplied them as a substitute for maid service (ha! !).

Pop grabbed the ironing board right away. "This would do it, if it could be made to fall at the right time."

Benson gave another of his odd laughs. "Think so? Try it."

Pop pushed the board so that it fell onto the floor. It hit with a woody 'splat,' quite unlike the heavy thud we had heard.

"See, Gram'paw?"

I tried to sound relieved. "That wasn't it, Pop. We must have been mistaken to think that it could have been done. Nothing to do now but pick up our marbles and go home." Play along with me, Pop, I prayed in my head. Take the excuse and let's get out of this if we can. I had begun to suspect where Benson had gone when he left the building.

Pop let me down. "So the board alone wouldn't do it. That proves nothing except that he had to rig it better than that."

He went to work to prove his point while I watched in agony. First he pulled the throw rug out from under the bed and wrapped it around the squared end of the ironing board. Then he went around the room searching for something. In the waste basket among the crumpled papers he found two lengths of cut nylon fishing line. He used the short piece to tie the rug in place.

"That's a good start," he said, "But I think it had to be even heavier still. Let me see now."

He went back to the closet and took out the heavy overcoat. This he draped about the rug-weighted ironing board and buttoned in place. It made an odd, headless mannikin.

"That should do it." He pushed the contraption over. It hit the floor with a satisfyingly heavy 'thunk.' "I thought so. I knew it had to be done with something still available in this room."

Benson didn't look too amused at this point. Still he wasn't overly worried. "Then what did I do? Give it orders to jump on the floor at a quarter to five?"

Pop snorted. "Of course. That's exactly what you did do. Now I'll demonstrate how you did."

He went methodically to work to establish his proof. First he moved one of the two chairs in the room and set it out in the center of the room with its back to the bed. He set his ironing board mannikin upright, standing on its pointed end, and held upright by leaning against the back of the chair. It fell over twice before he got it to stand. (I began to hope he was trying to signal for help with the repeated crashes. Then I remembered that the whole house was accustomed to hearing Benson fall around.) At last Pop got things arranged to his satisfaction.

Next he picked the battered old alarm clock off the bureau top. "Observe," he said, "That I have here a piece of machinery. Not only that, but a machine that can be timed within very close limits. Now I wind the alarm with the key in the back of the clock. When it goes off, it will turn the key, but no alarm will sound because the bell is missing. You should have thought to replace it, Benson. Or didn't you have time before the cops got here? I noticed it was missing right away. That lieutenant should have seen it too, if he'd known his job."

"To set things up I take this other piece of fish line you left in the waste basket. One end ties around the top button of your overcoat . . . like this. Then I tie the other end to the alarm key on the clock and set the alarm pointer to any time I want."

He wedged the old clock between the bed leg and the wall so that it was firmly held. The face of the

clock was against the wall, and the alarm key exposed and free to turn. He moved the chair and mannikin back until the fish line was just taut and pulling slightly on the button.

"Watch now." The clock went off. The key turned and wound up the line just enough to pull the ironing board off balance. Down it went.

"You're smart, Gram'paw." Benson wasn't in the least amused any more. "I think you're just too smart to stay healthy. Now, just for the record, see if you can tell me the rest of it."

Pop looked innocent and harmless. I knew he was neither, and braced myself for whatever was coming.

"Easy enough," he said. "You ditched the gun and money on your way back here."

"I put the money in the mail to myself. Had the package all ready before I stuck up the place."

"Smarter than I thought yould be! The gun you dropped in the bushes near here. I think that's why you went out a while ago: to pick it up. It's the bulge under your shirt now, isn't it?"

"Right you are." Benson pulled a short barrelled detective special .38 out of his waistband and cocked it with his thumb. "Just one more question, and we're through. Just what do you think comes next?"

Incredibly, Pop looked unperturbed. "I don't think," he said. "I know."

I thought I knew too. It wasn't a pleasant thought. Benson had already killed the loan office manager. He could only burn once.

HOLD THAT TIGER!!! The radio came on with a blast of volume that could have been heard on the corner. Pop had set it when he fooled with the dials earlier, and then timed his whole show beautifully.

The trouble was he hadn't been able to prepare me. Benson and I were both startled equally. I just about came out of my shoes.

Pop WAS ready, and he was fast for an old man. He jumped Benson and got his thumb wedged between the hammer and frame of the gun so it couldn't fire. If only I had been as fast. But I wasn't. I was still off balance. Pop slugged with his left, but he was off balance too by then and it was an old man's punch.

Benson yelled and hit Pop in the face. He tore the gun loose and braced to fire. The muzzle looked as big as a cannon.

In that confined space the shot was like the slamming report of a 12 guage shotgun. My ear drums cracked.

Benson came stright upright, stiff as a broom handle, his face contorted before he went down. For about the tenth time that day there was a slamming thud from the floor. He stayed down.

Over in the doorway Lt. Ryan put his own gun back in his pocket. None of us had heard the door open on its oiled hinges. He had been lis-

tening for almost the whole time. His single shot had broken Benson's back and gone on into the lung.

"Believe it or not," he told Pop later. "The police do their job the way it should be done. I figured Benson had stashed the gun and/or loot in the bushes and gone to pick them up. He didn't walk as drunk as he talked. I waited outside, and followed him when he came back in. When I cracked the door an inch, I heard you talking. Then I figured to let you show me how I should have done my job."

It was almost the only time I ever saw Pop at a loss for words. Usually he was a great talker."

It's a helluva feeling to look over the shoulder of an immigration officer and see your face staring back at you from an F.B.I. "wanted" poster.

HOT WHEELS

BY DON LOWRY

WHAT'S the matter with you, Bruce? We've cleared the gawdamned immigration and customs. Hit the road. Drive. What the hell you sweating about?"

Bruce Ray twisted the ignition key of the white sedan and drove slowly out of the Mexican Customs enclosure into the tourist trap-lined streets of Old Laredo. He glanced into the rear-view mirror; sighed; and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead.

"What's the matter? Plenty, Ed. While that spic immigration officer was questioning me I was looking over his shoulders at wanted notices on that immigration office bulletin board. I was damn near hypnotized by two of those F.B.I. wanted notices—one for you and one for me, Ed. It's a helluva feeling at any time to stare at your own mug shot but when it stares back at you during an immigration questioning it's gawdamned well haunting. Now you can start to sweat along with me, Ed. If it wasn't five in the morning that immigration bull might have been wide awake and we'd both be on our way back to the States—in handcuffs. Nice thought?"

Ed Burns lit two cigarettes and handed one to his partner in what had been—so far—a lucrative hot car racket.

"You sure they were our pictures, Bruce?"

"Hell, yes, I'm sure. That bulletin board was only six feet away from me. And I'm sure of something else—if Uncle Whiskers asked the Mexican authorities to be on the lookout for us at the border, our mug shots are also posted on wanted notices in the American Immigration offices. So how in hell do we get back in the States. The American immigration and customs bulls will make us as soon as we try to cross the border."

Burns and Ray came up with their new slant in the hot car racket

while sharing a two-man cell in U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth. Their response to the correctional process was an effort to correct obviously faulty modus operandi rather than equally obvious antisocial behavior. For the entire last year of their five-year terms for moving stolen cars across state lines, they used every minute of their cell life working up what they felt would be a fool-proof technique of car theft and subsequent sale.

Ray summed up their new MO in the gray half-light shadows of their B Cellhouse two-man cell the night before their release.

"OK, Ed, this will be the pitch and we won't deviate from it. You're tops with theatrical make-up. Every time you rent a car, alter your appearance. Make sure your rental contract is for at least four days. In that way we can get the heap out of this country and have it sold in Mexico before it's on the hot list. I'll provide the bogus bills of sale and get plates in non-title states. This will let us get by the spic customs officers and answer any questions if a smart highway patrol bull asks questions about ownership. And I'll come up with new I.D. for every trip into Mexico where I've connections in Monterrey for dumping the hot wheels. I can get a grand for each new sedan down there. Four cars a month means two grand for each of us."

"That's a helluva lot better than the 25¢ a day we've been getting here for the last few years," Ed Burns commented. "I don't see any flaws in the idea, Bruce. As long as you can keep coming up with new ID, bills of sale and plates, we should clean up.'

"You just worry about that make-up box, Ed. I've got an offset printer down in New Orleans that will print me anything from a credit card to a birth certificate. In Alabama and Mississippi all you need for legitimate plates is a notarized bill of sale. Keep the heat off yourself in renting the wheels and I'll keep coming up with the phoney paper and plates."

They shook hands on the penitentiary-born racket and within three days had moved their first U Drive from Houston to Monterrey. Now, ten months later, faced with FBI wanted posters, they wondered where the best laid plans of rogues had turned into a *manhunt*.

Bruce Ray drove faster as the last of Old Laredo's southern suburb boulevard met the long, straight highway crossing the desert on the road to Monterrey.

"Why go back up north?" Burns asked. "We're loaded. Let's lay up here in Mexico for the winter and let the scene cool off back in the States."

"No good, Ed. If we're not scooped in a few months, the FBI'll automatically put us on its special list. Then every agent in the country will actually get out and look for us. That's how they work when

they're looking for a lamster. For the first few months, in run of the mill beefs, they depend on those wanted posters to help some local law in making a routine pick-up. When that doesn't work, they mimeograph a complete dossier on the lamster, outlining everything from his favorite drink to the kind of hotel and clothing he prefers. The dossier is mailed to every special agent on and off the continent and the sad, hounded lamster doesn't have a chance. Like I said, no good; we've got to come up with something better than waiting for Uncle Whiskers to forget about us."

Ray slowed the sedan down as an approaching car topped a distant rise on the Mexican Highway. They gleefully broke any law on the books except traffic laws, a carefully observed part of all professional car thieves' MO.

"How do you think they made us, Bruce?"

"Damned if I know. I went to a different county seat every time to buy plates and used different ID every time."

"And I never looked the same at any rental agency," Burns reasoned. "And I never doubled back to the same town or city."

"Think Hernandez in Monterrey was nabbed by the Mexican FBI and blew the whistle on us?"

"Hell, no," Burns replied. "Half those sedans we dumped in Monterrey are taxis. Those cabbies would cut his throat if he sang."

"Oh, well, what the hell," Ray observed philosophically, "we're hot and we can't figure out how we drew the heat. But we've been on the lam before. Let's get this heap to Monterrey and then worry about what our next move will be."

"Keep your good eye open for a side road," Burns said. "We better pull off and let me do a make-up job on both of us. If they had our mug shots at the border, it's a good bet that copies of those circulars will be posted at the interior check points between here and Monterrey. No use taking chances."

Ray pulled the sedan up behind an abandoned adobe house and Burns took his theatrical make-up kit from the car trunk. With deft, skilled hands, he rapidly altered his own appearance from a tanned, scrawny-faced and blue-eyed thirty-year-old to a sallow, full-faced, brown-eyed man seemingly in his mid forties. Then, using paraffin, make-up paste, vegetable dye coloring, contact lenses and a false moustache, Burns altered Bruce Ray's appearance from a thin-faced, green-eyed, tanned forty-year old man to a completely different individual.

At the first interior check point on the Monterrey Road the Mexican Immigration officer glanced only casually at Burns and Ray. The customs officer was satisfied with the car documents and Mexican insurance papers for the car. They were waved on with a greeting of welcome by the unwary officials.

"As long as those Tourist Cards bear the right stamp and the paper is right, you always get by," Ray observed. "Make sure car papers are in order and show that Mexican insurance sticker on the windshield and the Customs bulls never bother you. They want only one thing down here—American dollars."

"Hell," Burns laughed, "we do better than that. We bring them American cars. We really help the economy."

"Don't get carried away, kid," Ray cautioned. "We still have another check point, the federalists, the highway patrol and then the Monterrey law. I wish I had some idea of the kind of heat we have on us and how we got it. Then I'd have a better idea of just how damn hot we really are."

"Think I should get that automatic out of my bag?" Burns asked. "I'm damn sure I'm not going to take a pinch down here."

"No good," Ray immediately replied. "This is the only road north and south. We get into a shooting scrape on this damn desert highway and we'd be trapped like lizards. Before we get into Monterrey we'll both get those rods out. All we can do out here on the highway is con our way along."

For a few minutes at the second interior check point both Ray and Burns felt their short con technique of handling immigration and customs officers would be unsuccessful.

"Step out of the car and come in the office, senors," the Mexican immigration officer ordered.

Before the immigration officer began his interrogation the customs officer asked for the car papers. From the office Ray and Burns watched as the customs officer checked the car's numbers on the doorpost and engine with those typed on the bogus papers.

"They'll check out," Ray thought to himself, "But if that car's numbers have been flashed down here on a hot list, we're dead."

At the same time, Burns was reassuring himself, "The rental contract on that sedan doesn't expire until tomorrow so let him check."

The immigration officer spread Ray's Tourista card out on the desk between him and the two wary car thieves. He turned to Ray. "Your birth certificate, senor?"

Ray produced his forged birth certificate and wordlessly handed it across the desk. The immigration officer compared its name with that on the tourista card.

"Where were you born, senor?"

"Galveston, Texas," Ray answered, recalling what he had typed on the pseudo certificate.

"Date of birth?"

Ray hesitated momentarily, just long enough for the Mexican official to look up sharply at anyone who could not immediately supply such familiar information. Then he recalled the date he had typed, "June 1, 1946," he answered.

As the officer went on with his questioning, Burns realized that he had neglected to study and memorize the information on his latest set of bogus ID. As inconspicuously as possible he laid out his own documents and desperately studied them as they lay on the desk. In an effort to allay the officer's suspicion he had turned them facing away from him. He realized he couldn't master all the information and sweat-dampened palms unconsciously rubbed against the office chair edges. In a spur of the moment attempt to stall for time he brushed away a fly crawling across the desk and deliberately knocked his papers to the floor. On picking them up he held them in his lap and quickly scanned the information.

"You are an American citizen, senor?" the officer asked as he turned to Burns.

"Si, senor," Ed Burns replied in a linguistic effort to establish friendly relations.

"Your purpose in coming to Mexico?"

"Couple weeks vacation," Burns smiled. "And some of your good Tequila."

The officer looked only briefly at Burns' papers and asked no more questions.

"That's all, senors," the officer stated.

The customs officer handed the car papers back to Ray and asked no questions.

"I wonder just what in hell that was all about?" Ray asked as he drove away from the interior check point. "Of all the times we've made this run, that's the first time we had a car checked or were even taken out of the car."

"I don't give a damn what it was all about as long as we got by. We're probably hot and its a lucky break that we stopped to fix up our faces," Burns said as he continued to study the information on his latest tourista card and birth certificate. "I got a helluva break back there, Bruce. I've had so damn many of these papers in the last year that I got careless and forgot to memorize the dates, occupation, marital status and the rest of the crap. If he had worked me over like he did you with those questions, he would have made me for sure."

"The way things seem to be going, we can't afford to get careless. Breaks don't go on forever," Ray philosophized.

The mountain passes were crossed and Monterrey suburbs loomed up before either man spoke again.

"Better pull up someplace before we get into the city and get this make-up off," Burns suggested. "With this damn heat and sweat even a Mexican bull would make us and we don't have to worry once we're inside the city limits. Hernandez has half the local law on his payroll."

Ray stopped the car behind a

palm grove on a side road and Burns worked with alcohol and astringents to remove their disguises. They were soon lost in the city traffic and just after noon Ray swung the sedan into a side street garage operated by Jules Hernandez.

"Never felt so good to walk away from a set of hot wheels before," Ray laughed as he and Burns removed their bags from the trunk. "Jules around?" he asked the Mexican garage worker waiting to move the car.

"In the office, senor Ray," the garage employee knowingly smiled. "You have a good trip?"

"Not bad," Ray replied.

"And not too damn good," Burns quipped as they walked to the garage office.

"Bueno," Hernandez greeted the two men as they walked into his office, "my two Norte Americano pistoleros. What you bring down this trip?"

"New Chev," Ray answered. "How're things down here, Jules?"

"Good. No problems that old Jules cannot handle."

"Well, take a look at that Chev and after you pay off, I want you to do us a small favor."

"Sure, Bruce, anything you want. A senorita maybe?" Jules Hernandez laughed as he removed a wad of American currency from a safe and began to peel off hundred dollar bills. "I don't need to look at what you bring down. I know it's what you say. Here you are, one thousand. Now what favor can I do for my favorite wholesalers?"

"Find out if there are any wanted notices over at the police station for Ed and me. Not that we think we're hot," Ray lied with a smile, "but we always like to make sure."

"That's easy," Hernandez said as he picked up the desk phone. "Garcia has all those circulars in his office," he explained to Ray and Burns, "and he is my very good friend."

After a few minutes wait, Hernandez reassured the hot car pair that the only new circulars from the United States were for a bank robber and post office burglar suspected of heading into Mexico. According to Garcia, a local police official, there was nothing on either Burns or Ray and nothing on any car thieves.

"Thanks, Jules," Ray laughed as he picked five of the hundred dollar bills and shoved the other five over to Burns. "Nothing like a little check-up once in a while."

"You be back down again next week?" Hernandez asked. "I can use anything you want to bring down."

"Don't know yet, Jules. We may take a little rest this trip. But I'll let you know before we leave," Ray explained with a reticence to confide in the Mexican hot car buyer.

"Maybe you play a little here with our beautiful Monterrey senoritas and you feel better. See you tonight at the club?"

"A stop for an evening at La Conchita is something you know damn well we'd never miss when we're in town, Jules," Ray laughed. "Where else can you find B girls whose 'B' means, 'I'll really *be* your baby for tonight!' and where Tequila sours are so damn good that they taste sweet? And where the cigarette girls push pot as fast as the flower girls do orchids? And where the kick line kids get their kicks from dancing nude? See you at your club, Jules. Wouldn't miss it."

Ray and Burns checked into the La Favorita hotel on the boulevard in the native rather than in the downtown tourist hotel area and slept 'til around ten that evening. At the La Conchita they were greeted with anticipated welcome as the last of the big spenders. Bartenders, waiters, pimps and whores knew them as Norte Americano friends of the boss and the ego-lifting attention given them soon dispelled their concern with the wanted notices at the border. In the course of the evening of wine, women and song, they separated and didn't meet 'til three the next afternoon back at La Favorita.

"Have a ball, Bruce?" Burns asked.

"A Tequila ball, a pot night on the town and a hot senorita beneath the Mexican moon. Maybe you have a point in saying we should lay up here for the winter —or forever. Only problem is that I'd kick off from too much love, lushing and living. How'd you make out, Ed?"

"I got taken in the oldest queer kick known to gay boys. Remember that real sexy, svelte blonde sitting alone in the corner? The one you and I damn near got into an argument over?"

"Hell yes. You make her?"

"Get a load of this. Remember how smooth a dancer she was? How slick and sexy she could kiss on the dance floor?"

"A real doll, Ed. You had the same old Burns luck getting into her pants."

"Now get your laughs, Bruce. When I got into *her* pants I discovered she was a boy dressed like a dame."

Ray and Burns laughed 'til their Tequila-fogged heads ached.

"You gotta be kiddin'," Ray continued to laugh. Wha'd you do with the weirdoo?"

"Slapped his cute ass out of bed and told him to go the hell home and bring me his sister. And damned if he didn't."

Both men continued to laugh hysterically as they started back into the Tequila morning pick-ups again. Half drunk and half high from pot, they were back at La Conchita by nine. By midnight, they were still together at the same table with two dancers from the kick-line, Burns assured that, having seen what he wanted in the nude, he wouldn't be taken again by a queer.

"Senors," a waiter whispered, "Jules wants to see you in his office."

Ray and Burns lurched with continuing laughs through velvet drapes at the end of the La Conchita bar and down a hallway to the club office of Jules Hernandez.

"Probably wants to talk us into getting on the road again," Burns laughed. "And all I want to do is get back in bed again."

"Sit down, my pistoleros," Jules said, "and hear some news. Or read it yourselves." He tossed two FBI wanted notices across the desk.

Shocked into sobriety, Ray and Burns carefully read their own wanted notices.

"Garcia just received these today," Hernandez continued. "You slipped up somewhere along the road. Si?"

"Si," Bruce Ray shrugged. "So what? Garcia's bulls won't bother us here."

"No," Hernandez agreed. "But the Federalistas and our own Mexican FBI will grab you. I think maybe you should get out of town, even out of Mexico. Si?"

"Again I agree with you," Ray said. "Any idea how or where? Your federal law will be watching bus and rail stations as well as the airports. And the U.S. Immigration will be watching for us at the border."

"Senors," Herandez smiled, "that's your problem. But I think you should leave here *now*, the back way and not through the club. I can let you out here and you can cut through the alleys to the boulevard. Get a cab on the boulevard and get someplace—out of Monterrey tonight. Si?"

"OK, Jules. You know best. Thanks for the tip. Frame those wanted notices—a momento of your two best wholesalers."

Hernandez led Ray and Burns through two locked doors and down a bricked hallway leading to a steel exit door leading to an alley behind La Conchita.

"Adios, senors. Vaya con Dios,' Hernandez bid the two lamsters goodnight as he shook hands with them.

As the steel plate door was locked behind them, Burns reached into his hip pocket for his automatic. At the same time he placed a hand on Ray's arm.

"Get your piece, Bruce. We have two blocks of black alleys and I think we're patsies. If Hernandez had been playing it square he wouldn't have hurried us away. He likes the dough we throw around that club too well and he knows we both carry our rolls on us in U.S. cash. You take one side of the alley. I'll take the other."

Burns was correct in his hunch. The two men had slowly eased along opposite sides of the pitch dark alley when they were jumped by Mexican pistoleros from the low roof of an off-alley shack. The first warning was a sound of a foot as one of the attackers leaped from the

roof above. Pitch darkness was as much help to Ray and Burns as it was a handicap to the attackers who were silhouetted momentarily over their heads, as shadows rather than as clear figures. And the attackers landed in the center of the narrow alley. Both Ray and Burns, still keeping to alley edges, backed off and began firing into the vague spring forms of their attackers. They emptied their automatics and then ran, leaping over the slain or wounded figures of their attackers. As they turned from one narrow alley into another they met light from the boulevard. Both men slammed new clips into their automatics.

"Come on, quick, Bruce," Burns panted. "Hernandez won't make a move here on the boulevard; too many people and too much light. But he won't be far behind us."

"What about our bags and stuff at La Favorita?" Ray asked.

"To hell with it," Burns said as they opened a cab's door. He'll have his boys waiting for us out there before we could get through this traffic."

"Where to, senors?" the driver asked.

"Downtown," Burns ordered.

Two blocks farther and again four blocks farther, the men changed cabs, hurrying through bars at each stop to prevent any tail by Hernandez or his hoods. In the third cab, Ray asked Burns what he had in mind.

"Rent a car downtown and head north to Matamoras. The one thing Hernandez will figure will be taking a rental car from Mexico to U.S. and the U.S. Customs will never make us because U.S. tourists often rent cars down here and leave them on the American side of the border at agency offices there. We'll cut into the American bar on the Square and you wait while I walk over to a rental office. We'll pick up some Dexedrine and make it to the border before daylight. OK?"

"How do we get across the border to Brownsville when the Immigration people there are probably looking over our mug shots every time they go on duty?" Ray asked.

"We'll have to gamble, Bruce. By the time we hit the border, the only border crossers will be partying American drunks, all looking scruffy, Tequila-filled and love-filled. By the time we hit the border we'll be able to play that role without any trouble but the Dexedrine will keep us awake and sharp. Buy it?"

"Might as well," Ray shrugged. "Hang around here and we could face a murder beef for that rumble back in the alley and a plea of self defense wouldn't hold water for us. Let's get with it."

With his bogus American credit cards and forged driver's license, Burns had no trouble in renting a Mexican U Drive.

"Get the Dexedrine?" he asked Ray when he picked him up.

Ray offered him the brown bottle of orange tablets and Burns quickly swallowed two. A block away he stopped for coffee to speed up the awakening affect of the Dexedrine. The two lamsters drove north on the secondary road to Matamoras.

"Keep an eye out for law, Bruce, I'm going to push this heap and set a new record to the border."

All the way to Matamoras, whenever there were no approaching or following headlights, Burns and Ray, taking turns at the wheel, kept the fraudulently rented sedan wide open. They reached Matamoras before dawn.

"Stop at the Ritz bar," Ray said when they were in downtown Matamoras. "Might as well have a few fast ones and make the act convincing for the U.S. Immigration. Too damn bad you don't have your make-up box along on this trip."

"Wait 'til you see yourself in a mirror, Bruce. You'd never recognize yourself."

They stopped at the Ritz bar and drank four Tequila sours as fast as the sleepy bartender, long accustomed to Gringo drinking eccentricities, could mix them. Smoking long, black Mexican cigars, they drove to the U.S. Immigration barrier at the Brownsville entry point.

"Where were you born?" the immigration officer asked Burns.

"N'Orleans," Burns slurred.

"How long have you been in Mexico?"

"Couple days."

"Where do you live?"

"Hushtown," Burns went on with his drunk act.

"Where are you employed?"

"Shafeway Store," Burns went on.

"May I see your I.D.," the immigration officer persisted.

The immigration officer retained the Burns I.D. while he questioned Ray who responded in a similar drunk role. He then asked for Ray's I.D. and returned to the barrier office while the customs officer took over the usual interrogation. Then the immigration officer returned with the inspector in charge of the Brownsville Immigration Post.

"Boys," the inspector stated, "we'll permit you to enter but you better call for someone to drive your car. You wouldn't get far in Brownsville, not even to the Avis garage, in the shape you're in. Want me to call the Avis people for you?"

"OK, shir," Burns replied.

"Just pull up over there," the inspector told Burns. "The Avis people will be here in a few minutes.

One hour later Burns and Ray were locked in cells at the Brownsville police station.

"Oh you dumb, dumb bastard," Ray exclaimed when they realized what happened.

When the Brownsville Avis office manager on duty was advised that an Avis car from Monterrey was at the border for delivery, he checked

his Teletype notices. He had no advice on such a car rented for use outside Monterrey. He teletyped his Monterrey branch and received word immediately that the car had been rented for local use only. He called the Brownsville police department.

Both men protested their innocence.

"We were on a drunk. We were not stealing any damn car," they both protested, still half drunk and high on Dexedrine.

"We're not holding you on car theft," the detective advised. "You're square with the Avis people. You paid them and they don't want to lay any charge, even if it would be necessary. We're interested in those two automatics, your two sets of I.D., typed with the same typewriter, and those two money belts filled with U.S. currency. That's a lot of money for two drunks to be carrying around. And how about that bottle of Dexedrine. Anyone tell you it's against the law to bring barbiturates into the country?"

Fingerprinting did the rest. The FBI agent stationed at Brownsville was in the station half an hour after the men were booked.

"Something familiar about this pair to me," he commented when he was informed about the rental car. Then he recalled his Bureau's flyers out on the pair, not by the fictitious names on their present ID but by their faces and fingerprint classifications. "Sure," he laughed. "It's Burns and Ray. We've been looking for them since they left Leavenworth. Neither one made a single report on Conditional Release agerements. And a month after they were out we found a set of Texas plates in a shallow river bed. Nice, greasy fingerprints of Burns were still on the plates. The plates came from a rental car that had dropped out of sight. A month later, Ray was made by a sharp county sheriff's wife in Mississippi who thought he looked suspicious when he bought plates on a phoney bill of sale. She talked to her husband into taking prints from an office ballpoint used by Ray in making out his application form for a new plate. When report after report came in from U Drives about disappearing cars, we tied in Burns and Ray with them. You booked a live pair this time."

Burns and Ray were back on the yard at Leavenworth three months later, serving twenty-five years rather than five, and facing a detainer from Mexico for the triple slaying of the three Mexican hoods. Ballistic tests, performed by the FBI, convinced the Mexican authorities that they too wanted to see Ray and Burns again.

"Can you find a way out of this one," Burns asked as he and Ray walked around the ball park path.

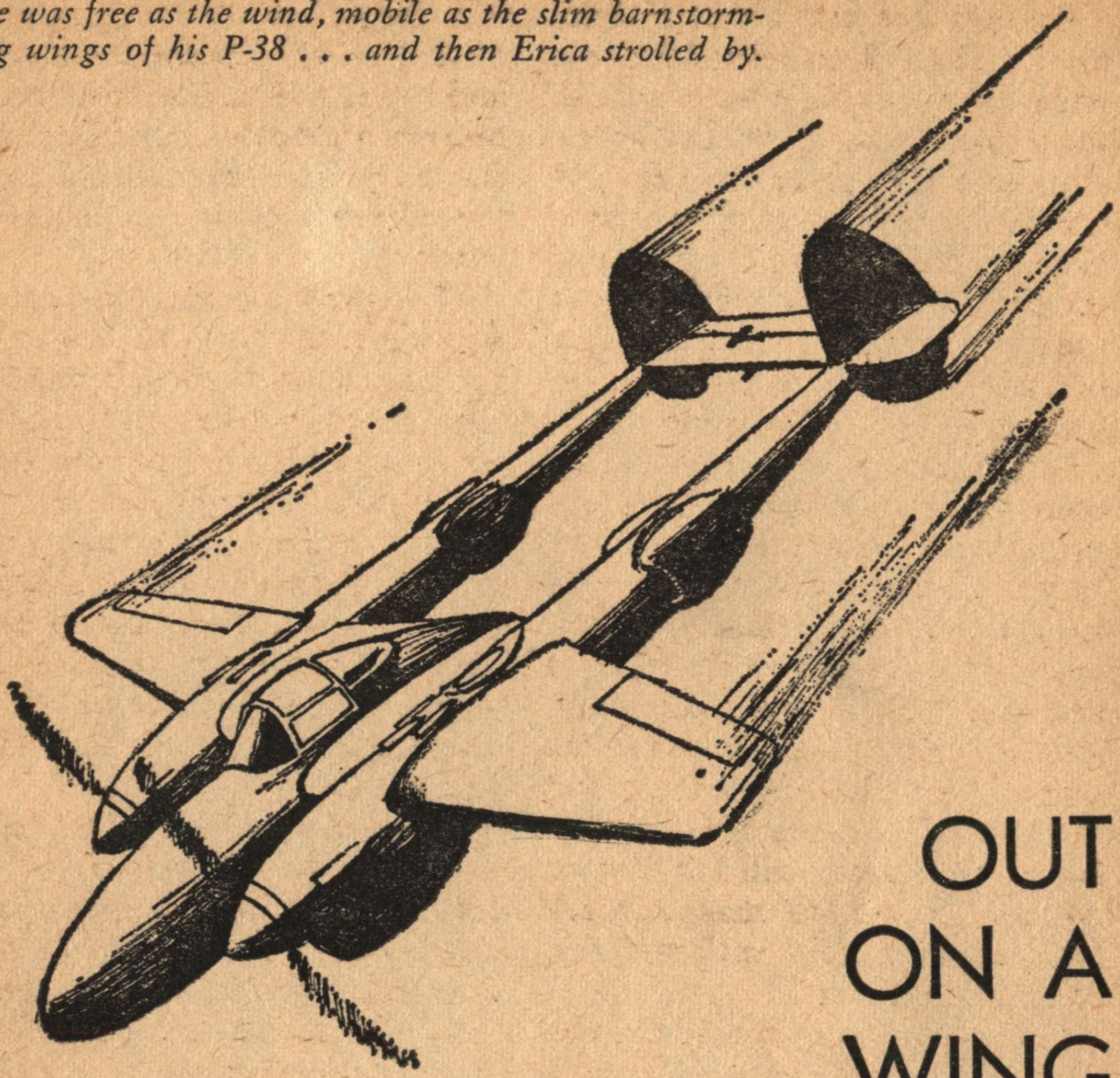
"I don't even want to think about it," Bruce Ray spat. "Why don't you look around here for a queer and

stop bugging me. Remember that night in Monterrey when I let you take over the thinking."

"So, I didn't think straight," Burns replied glumly.

"Well," Ray exclaimed, "that night ended you and me as partners, Ed. As a matter of fact, I think we're both dead. I can't see any way out and I can see one more trip back down to Manana country—in handcuffs. And, if we live long enough to make it, I got a hunch that it will be a one-way trip. Adios, punk. Go pick up a broad over there in the bleachers."

He was free as the wind, mobile as the slim barnstorming wings of his P-38 . . . and then Erica strolled by.



OUT ON A WING

BY ALEX PONG

I HADN'T wanted to get involved, but as we kissed it was too late to think about not getting involved. With two hundred in bribe money burning a hole in my pocket I was involved up to my ears.

She was a human cathedral sort of, a well built tawny blonde and even without a body she would have been beautiful because when the Lord finished fashioning her face he must have considered it his masterpiece and thrown away the mold so that none of the lesser gods could steal it and make an Erica for themselves. Erica was unique.

I'd seen her first at the Pendleton air show. I was sitting on the wing of my airplane watching the show, answering questions, generally enjoying myself when she drifted by with one of the little clots of people wandering among the airplanes. She paused to look at the big P-38 fighter and I smiled at her. She smiled back, stared at me for a moment, then wandered on.

The message in her look had been as clear as if she'd worn a sign. Husband hunter. I am a lonely girl looking for a man to give me a nice house, a flock of kids, a new station wagon in the drive, a new color TV in the living room, and you Landy Thomas are the man I have been seeking all these years. Run, run as fast and as far as you can and still I will catch you for you are MY man, MY pillar of strength, MY earth and sky, MY sun and moon.

I watched her for a long time instinctively thinking, trouble. She paused in front of another airplane and looked suddenly back at me. No sweet lonely princess, I thought, I am not the man you have been seeking all these years. Leave me to my airshows, the occasional cropdusting and firebombing, the infrequent article for an aviation magazine. It is all I have, but I am happy this way. I have had all the woman I want. So go, and leave me to my peace.

Trouble is, it was far too late when I looked away.

I forgot about her until she drifted by with another little group and it was as if all the other people became suddenly invisible. There was only the lonely concrete ramp, the overcast sky, my airplane, me, and her.

There was a tiny spark on her left hand, but her look said to disregard it. I didn't smile because the ring meant that there was a promise to be kept and a man somewhere who thought that she was his, a hometown fellow who would make a good husband and would buy her a nice house, and if not a new station wagon, a good used sedan, and if not a color TV, at least a good twenty one inch black and white.

Sometimes a hometown fellow isn't enough. A girl has to have something more glamorous. Trouble. I stared at her for a long hard moment, then as she hesitantly lifted her hand and waggled her fingers I turned away.

It was time to fly.

The airport patrol came out and cleared away the crowd so I could fire up and taxi out. I did not think about her until I taxied back in eighteen minutes later. She was there behind the ropes, watching, waiting.

I parked, shut down, and climbed out. Usually I enjoy walking down the line signing programs, shaking hands, answering stupid questions. This time I dreaded it.

She held out neither hand nor autograph book, only a look and I could not walk past. She said hello in a soft shy voice.

I smiled heroically and uttered some stock comment about pretty girls.

She smiled shyly. "What's it like up there?"

We were saying too much with our eyes. I had to get away. Someone thrust a program at me and I signed it without looking. "It's all right." I said finally and moved on to someone else.

A little later I went back to the airplane. I did a slow walk around check and when I got back to the nose she was standing there watching me.

She said my exhibition was thrilling.

I thanked her.

She asked if didn't I ever get scared.

All the time I said.

She said it was too bad that it had to be such a gray day.

I said that indeed it was.

She said her name was Erica Hoskins.

I lied and said I was glad to meet her.

She asked if I flew in many shows.

Along with a little cropdusting and writing I said, that was mainly how I made my living.

I did a lot of traveling then?

She said it sounded interesting and I must meet a lot of people.

I said I did.

I said it was all right and she asked where and when my next show would be.

I said I would be in Fresno in another two weeks.

She said that that was a coincidence because that was where she lived and I wondered if I could afford to cancel my appearance and knew that I could not.

I asked her what she was doing in Pendleton.

She was visiting relatives.

She asked me if I was married.

I said I had been.

She asked if she was prying.

I said she wasn't.

She wanted to know what had happened.

She was prying.

How do you tell a stranger about two different loves, so horribly in opposition. Vera was a wonderful girl. I'd never stop thinking that, but rather obliquely she'd insisted I quit flying. Too dangerous. How do you tell a stranger about four safe, dreary, years, perched on a cacophonous assembly line like a plucked eagle. Do you tell strangers about that, or about how safe on the ground Vera had gotten herself killed very very dead in an encounter with a truck?

I told her.

I said I saw by her ring that she was engaged.

She said that she wasn't really engaged, but that ever since she had been small her parents had been ex-

pecting her to marry a Francis Sullivian heir to a winery fortune in Fresno.

I said that that was nice.

She said that she wasn't sure.

Her Aunt and Uncle rescued me when they came along and said that they were tired.

I got the hell out of there the minute the show was over.

I'd contracted for two shows in Fresno, one on Saturday, one on Sunday. It was Friday afternoon when I got into Fresno. The boys in the tower welcomed me to town and told me where to park and then while it was still light I ripped off every inspection plate on the plane. When you're going to be flying inverted, fifty feet off the deck at four hundred miles an hour you'd just as soon nothing went wrong. A little missing cotter pin or frayed cable can ruin your whole day if it comes unglued at a time like that. I had her buttoned up by eight thirty. Then I got hold of the gas boy and together we washed it.

I'd had it waxed in Detroit a week earlier so she really shone, dark olive green, red lips and white sharks teeth painted on each nacelle, a light blue bottom. I reached up and gave the red, "Landy Thomas, Detroit," a last swipe with the rag, pulled out my wallet, gave the boy a five, thanked him and let him go.

She came by that night, driving slowly, looking at the airplanes. I was afraid she'd stop, but she didn't, just shot me a big smile and waved. As surely as I knew that the sun would get up in the east I knew she would be at the show but I didn't expect to see her again that evening.

She came back about half an hour later this time with what I guessed was her boy friend. Like I said. Sometimes a hometown fellow isn't good enough, even a rich one. They have to have something more glamorous. Trouble.

Or is it that a girl just has to take her prospective mates and stand them side by side for comparison, never mind the sparks, and damn the flying fur.

She introduced me and right away he smiled a big call me Sully smile. Right away I disliked him.

"Landy." I said taking his hand. He was taller than me by three or four inches, maybe a few pounds heavier.

He said he'd never seen a P-38 in the flesh before. He wanted to know how fast it could go.

I said it was redlined at four twenty.

He said an F-51 was redlined at five oh five.

I wondered why her parents would want her to marry something like him and the way she looked at me she could have been saying aloud. "Landy you don't know the pressure I'm under. Everybody I know expects us to get married. They've got me trapped. There's no where to run. Help me Please."

Trouble.

Then I knew why she'd brought Sully. With him there was no way I could say out loud that I didn't want anything to do with her or her problems, that she could fight her own battles. I could say it only with a look.

I turned away and told Sully that in a fifty one you were no where if the engine quit. He was a boor, a pretentious boor.

He wanted to know if didn't I think that actually, all things considered, the Rolls Merlin in the fifty one was a better engine than the Allisons in the thirty eight because after all he had a friend who was an expert who raced unlimited hydroplanes and said friend wouldn't have anything to do with an Allison.

I wished to hell they would both leave.

Erica brushed past me to examine the oil cooler shutter in which she was not the least interested. The look she gave me was a silent scream for help.

When I looked away I knew I had said yes with my eyes so I said. "Your boy friend is trying to start an argument about airplanes. Does he know what he's talking about?"

She smiled a smile that could have melted the icecaps and said she thought he did.

I rubbed the back of my neck. It was a lousy day for fighting. "Well in that case I won't argue with him. Me, I can't really tell one airplane from another. Fly one you've flown'm all."

He lit a cigarette, shot me the big smile again and said not to take offense because he wasn't trying to cut my airplane any, just that this friend of his was one of the top engine men in the country. He was patronizing as all hell. Then he announced grandly that he had done a little flying too and went on to explain that he had a commercial license.

I said that that was nice.

He exhaled a jet of smoke. "My fiancee tells me you put on quite a show."

"Some people like it." I invited him to the show, but he had to run up to Sacramento he said.

"Erica will be there though. You can bet on that." He had an unpleasant little laugh. "Erica tells me that this is all you do for a living."

"More or less."

He sucked on his cigarette and exhaled a small cloud in my direction. "Make any money?"

"I get by."

He laughed the unpleasant little laugh again. "Yeah? Yeah I'll bet you do. Maybe I should buy a P-38 and we can do it as a team like."

"Be better if you could dig up an old Messerschmitt or Focke Wolfe."

"Yeah?"

"Then we could put on a world war two dogfight and I could shoot you down in flames." I found that I could laugh just as unpleasantly as he.

He laughed with me for half a

second, then stopped abruptly. "Oh, you want to keep it strictly solo. Okay guy. That's all right by me."

I mimicked his patronizing tone and said not to take offense because I wasn't trying to cut his flying ability any, it was just that my old flight instructor happened to be an expert at aerial combat.

He hah hahed for a moment then looked at Erica and stopped. She'd wandered over to another airplane. He examined the end of his cigarette then looked down at his feet. He ticked the ashes off the butt. "My fiancee has taken quite a shine to you Thomas."

I said that that was news to me.

He said not to play dumb. The hayseed act didn't go over with him at all. "She's just about the best little piece a man could ever get his hands on Thomas, so don't queer it for me, okay?"

My dislike was turning to disgust. "I don't reckon I follow you Sully."

"Christ. Do I have to draw you a picture?" He kept his voice low. "Erica hasn't been around much. At least not enough to know how important money is. Right now she's got this idea that maybe she should marry someone like you, but she'll get over it if you let her."

I said that she was twenty one and old enough to know what she wanted and what was I supposed to be able to do anyway.

He wanted to know how long I would be in town.

Until I felt like leaving, I said. "Maybe Sunday night right after the show. Maybe not until next week."

Erica had her back to us.

He took out his wallet. "Look Thomas. Just play it cool and sort of pretend not to notice her while you're here. Leave right after the show and there's a hundred in it for you. That's plain enough isn't it?"

Right then I learned to hate. "Isn't she worth more than that to you?"

He swore and said he'd make it two hundred.

I held out my hand and he put a hundred and two fifties in it. "Thanks Thomas. If you're ever in Fresno again look me up. I'll show you around."

"Any time." I said.

He called to Erica then and said that it was time they let me go. On her way back to the car she searched my face with her eyes, but I kept my face expressionless. She looked scared.

The air show was part of a centennial celebration or something and she was there of course, early.

I sat on the wing and baked in the valley sunshine. In the contracts it always says I have to have my plane on view for the whole show, but they don't care where I go so long as I'm there to fly as scheduled. There isn't anything that says I have to sit out in the sun and sweat with the rest of the spectators, but an airplane is funny. It attracts people who like to push and pull at things so I stay with the plane.

There was good crowd control.

All the airplanes to be flown were behind ropes. It wasn't really necessary that I stay with the plane, but I did. I couldn't figure out a way to get through the crowd without talking to her.

She stood behind the ropes in the front row, there watching me every time I looked up, ever faithful, a true camp follower. I wondered what it would be like married to her.

When one of the guards walked underneath my wing I stopped him and told him to let the blonde come out. I didn't have to tell him which blonde. In any crowd she would be THE blonde.

She stopped beside the nose and her look said that she was depending on me. After all, I was HER man now, HER pillar of strength, HER earth and sky.

I told her she'd seen all I was going to do up in Pendleton and that she was going to get all hot and sunburned for nothing.

THE look again as she said she didn't mind.

I asked her why I should be the one to get Sully off her back and told her that nobody had to do anything they didn't want to do especially get married.

She said I didn't know what helpless was. Sure she could just up and leave town, but she didn't think her parents could take that. They'd been poor when they'd come to California and they'd worked for twenty years making the right friends, going to the right places. They'd sent her to the right schools, helped her to be elected Miss Fresno County some years back, so that she could attract the right men. They'd partied with the right people and practically arranged a marriage with the richest most eligible young man in the valley.

I asked her what did she expect me to do. I knew what she expected me to do, but I knew she wouldn't say it.

She said she didn't know.

I said her parents could do all they did and more and she could love them very much, but she did not have to sell herself into misery to prove it. No love was that strong. They couldn't make her marry him.

She said of course they couldn't. No more than anyone could use love to make an airshow pilot give up his flying and put Cadillacs together. No love was that strong.

There wasn't any answer for that.

It was a crazy thing to do but I'd been involved since Pendleton anyway. I looked at my watch and told her to go around to the back of the wing. At the back I held out a hand and told her to come up. Practically everyone on the airport was watching us. I didn't really care. It was a way to scare her off, get her out of my hair.

I asked her if she'd ever been up.

"Once. Sully took me up."

Did she like it?

"It was all right."

I said the ride she was going to

go on in ten minutes would be a little more than just all right. It was going to scare the hell out of her.

She found out what it was like to come right off the ground into a slow roll, what it was like to do a sixteen point hesitation roll where you hold position every twenty two and a half degrees, where you're a scant fifty feet off the ground sitting on your side with the queasy feeling of falling sideways toward the blurred concrete. She discovered the sensation of utter weightlessness, the surprised feeling of finding that only the world turned upside down, that the man in the airplane was the center of his own universe. And she found at the end what it was like to buzz the field at four hundred plus, the engines screaming, and then the sudden awful silence of two dead engines, a sweeping deadstick loop with both engines feathered and a silent landing marred only by a soft chirp from the tires.

And when it was all over she was only the slightest bit green. I hadn't scared her enough to send her away and I was the scared one then.

As I climbed out the announcer asked the crowd to give us a big hand and no matter how many times you hear it you never get tired of that ripple of applause.

I stood on the wing smiling, waved, then turned to help her out. As she stood up beside me the announcer asked for a hand for an ex Miss Fresno County and they gave her a bigger hand then me.

"That's you they're applauding." I said. "Wave."

She waved like a real queen and smiled to the crowd. The look she gave me said she would gladly go through the whole routine again, strapped to the propeller if that was what I wanted her to do.

Queen for a day. She kissed me then, once on each cheek and the audience liked that too.

I said that that wasn't necessary and wondered how many cameras had recorded the action.

She said that it had seemed like the thing to do.

I helped her off the wing. "They'll want your autograph too."

We signed programs, answered questions, shook hands, and somewhere along the line reporters took her in tow with a barage of questions and popping flash bulbs.

The look on her face and the silent words on her lips as she shot me a last look before she was gone were, "call me."

An airport after an air show is a quiet place. I pulled on the canopy cover, climbed down and locked up the ladder, gave her a final pat and walked back across the empty ramp. The show had been over for two hours.

Call me . . .

He was standing by the gate to the parking lot where I had the rented Chev.

He was mad as hell. "Congratulations."

"Hello Sully."

He blocked the gate. "You really finked out Charlie."

"How so." I said blandly.

"That was a real bright one you pulled. Right in front of ten thousand people."

He wanted his two hundred dollars.

I didn't want the money, but I couldn't understand how anyone with so much could be so cheap. We stared at each other for a bit and then to break it off I said. "What two hundred dollars?"

"She says she's going to marry you." He half sneered. "You don't really want her. I know your kind. Airport bum. You make maybe four or five a year. What kind of life is that for a girl like her. Huh?"

I just looked at him and began to understand why so many murders were committed.

"You think you can take her away from me? Huh?" His face was only inches from mine.

I wasn't trying to take anyone away from anybody. I just wished like hell they would go away and leave me alone, both of them.

"Big glamorous air show pilot. You're not going to get her Thomas. You don't have a chance. You know why?"

I said no I didn't know why.

Because, he said, he was going to marry her that night.

I said that was very nice and congratulated him. She seemed like a very nice girl.

"You don't think I can do it do you?" He said I had another think coming. "Her parents would sell their souls to get her married off to me. You know that? Huh? I stomp all over them. Her parents don't smoke. I do. I go over there and blow smoke right in their faces. Things like that. And do you know what they do? They smile. Why? Because I'm rich. And when I go over there tonight and tell them Erica and I are going over to Vegas to get married they'll just wish us the best. You think she's too stuck on you to go off with me now? Just watch and see. Maybe she doesn't go for me too much, but she's stuck on her parents. She'll do anything for them and they want her to marry me. See?"

I said I saw, but that it didn't seem like it would have the best of futures as marriages went.

"You don't think it's going to work out that way? You don't think she'll do anything her parents tell her? Ha. I'll go in there and say I just can't wait any more and her mother will go upstairs and start packing for her."

I said he seemed very confident.

He sneered. "I'll see you at the show tomorrow." He patted his back pocket. "And back here I'll have a marriage certificate." He turned and strode back to his car.

He was right about my having another think coming. I was going to have to take myself into a corner and say five hundred times out loud. "I don't care what happens to her.

It is not my problem and I don't care what happens to her. She is just another girl and I do not care. . . ."

In a little while he would be knocking at her door. And he was right of course. I didn't really want her. I was just an airport bum and that was no life for a girl like her. Hell, I didn't want anything to do with her.

Fortunately there weren't many Hoskins in the telephone book. The third listing was the right one and I didn't recognize her voice, but when I asked for her she said that it was she.

I said that I thought that I had heard her say to call her.

She said that yes she had and that she had been afraid that I would not.

I asked her how long it took to drive to her place from the airport.

She said that it took about twenty minutes, fifteen if you drove fast, but that it would be better if I didn't come over.

I looked at my watch. In another ten minutes he would be pounding on her door.

It was like losing an engine just after take off. There wasn't any time for stalling around. I told her to come down. There was a spot out west she might like a look at.

She said she would tell her parents that she was going out for a drive and I fidgeted and fretted until she drove into the parking lot.

The place out west wasn't pretty at all really. It was a patch of flat ground at the foot of the hills near Panoche. Old sheep graze or something. I'd made a forced landing there in an old C-18 Beech years earlier. The most startling thing about it was the appalling quiet.

We stood near the plane and looked at what view there was. I said she was a virgin wasn't she.

She blushed and said she was.

I reached up and opened the door to the nose luggage compartment. "Then if it's all right with you we're going to put an end to that right now." I took out my sleeping bag and an air mattress.

"No Landy."

"Why not." I went to work at inflating the air mattress.

She couldn't seem to think of anything to say. When I was done I said. "Big air show hero. Now that I'm not standing up on my airplane waving and smiling at the crowds I don't look so heroic do I. You don't want money? You want romance. Well I can give you romance. We'll hit fifty different towns a year and see all the pretty sights there are to see. Romance is where you say nice things to the girl. All right. If I could have a choice between you or your weight in gold I'd take you because gold doesn't really mean very much to me. I'm a sentimentalist. I like to go up into a cold clear sky and cut a few all by myself. I like to go to church on Sundays, but it's very rarely the same church twice. To me one of the most beautiful things in the world is a sunset turn-

ing jet contrails red. Money green doesn't turn me on too much, so I won't ever be able to buy you nice clothes and things like that. Security? I can't give you any of that. Sometimes I don't make even four thousand a year. I couldn't buy life insurance if I tried. But Romance? I can give you that. Ever since Pendleton you've wanted to try a little romance so if you'll just look out at yonder hills and note that I've picked the most scenic setting I can think of while you take off your clothes you'll find out what romance is like."..

I didn't expect her to do it.

She looked at the view and then she looked at me and started to take off her clothes. Slowly she unbuttoned her blouse and dropped it on the sleeping bag, then her bra, very slowly, very deliberately. And when she was done she said to come and take her.

It wasn't exactly perfect because she was terribly scared, but it was better than I had expected. I'd wanted her to cry, but her eyes weren't even damp.

As she was dressing she said. "That's all you brought me out here for isn't it Landy?"

I said it wasn't.

"What did you bring me out here for."

"To show you how shoddy romance alone can be. You want romance. You want someone to court you and say pretty things to you, not just an arranged marriage. I can give you that, but you also want a nice house with wall to wall carpeting, a flock of kids and a new station wagon in the drive, color TV and a stereo set, which I can't and won't give you. Sometimes you can't always have everything you want, but Sully can give you all that and more. Fur coats, expensive trips abroad, you name it. And if he's not exactly romantic it's still a lot better than some girls get. He might even run around a bit in the unlikely event he ever finds someone prettier than you, but you'll be well taken care of. Why don't you just admit that that's what you want out of life. Marry him and be happy about it. With him at least you'll always sleep in a bed. With me you'll spend a good many uncomfortable nights under the wing of an airplane, sniffing clean crisp air, watching the stars roll around the heavens, wishing that things weren't so God awful romantic."

"You don't want me do you Landy?"

I said I liked my life just the way it was and I wasn't about to change it to suit anyone else though she could share it with me just the way it was if she wanted. "You'd be a lot better off with Sully."

After awhile she said that maybe I was right and could we please go home.

At the airport I helped her down off the wing and then without a word she walked over to her car, got in and drove away. I took the

rented Chev and went to my motel. Sunday there would be another show and after that I would be glad to get out of town.

In the morning I checked out early and went out to the airport not really in the mood for breakfast.

He was waiting by the plane.

He said hello.

I nodded and packed my shaving kit and various paraphenalia into the nose.

He waited until I had buttoned up the compartment. Then he hit me in the face. I wasn't expecting it and sat down more abruptly than I would have liked to. He looked down at me and said. "Did you know that we had the police out looking for her last night."

I said was that a fact and stood up. My nose was bleeding.

"I just talked to her." He said.

I asked him if they'd had a pleasant conversation and he hit me again. I'm not very good at fighting.

I stood up and it seemed that one tooth was lose. I turned my back and undid the ropes holding the canopy cover.

"She's a bit upset, but nothing compared to her parents."

I said that that was too bad.

"You f—— her didn't you Thomas?"

That was a word I never use. I turned around and hit him in the mouth.

He went sprawling and skinned his wrist on the concrete. Sitting he spat out a tooth. "What I wanted to tell you is that I'm going to forgive her and nothing has changed. We're going to announce the wedding date officially next week."

Still, he did not get up. I said I hoped that they would have all happiness.

He got up then. "Keep the two hundred. And you're welcome to stay and do your show. Just get out of town by six tonight or I'll kill you."

I said I would be out of town before that.

Then he said it again. "But you did f—— her didn't you."

I hit him in the mouth again.

From the concrete he said. "I just thought you ought to know that you're not the first. I was." He grinned and I could see that two of his teeth were gone. He got up then and left. I knew he was lying.

Neither of them attended the show. I hadn't expected them.

When it was over and the people were drifting back through the gates I went into the administration building and got a check from the promoter for five hundred dollars and a promise of expense money when I sent my gas slips and other bills. Then I filed a flight plan for Detroit and went outside.

She was standing by the airplane with a small suitcase.

I asked her what she was doing.

"I'd rather have romance."

"What about your parents?"

"Upset, but you can't let other people do your living for you."

I said that that was true.

"You said if I wanted I could share it with you."

She was beautiful. "You can put your suitcase in the nose. I'll be back in a minute."

"Where are you going."

"Have to amend that flight plan. There is going to be two on board." I turned and went back to change the flight plan.

By six o'clock we were already married and long gone out of Reno. As we climbed up and away from the setting sun I wondered what Sully was doing, then forgot him as Erica pointed out a pair of red contrails above and behind us.

THE PARTY LINE

BY E. F. GOLDEN

"It couldn't have been her," he assured himself. "Guess I'm imagining things . . . seeing ghosts . . . ghosts in the snow."

ALL DAY long the gray skies had threatened. Now, as the winter night closed in, snow began to fall. Softly at first, without sound. Clem Obart first saw that it was snowing when he came out of his sagging roofed barn and peered cautiously around.

He had finished his chores. They didn't take long. Just throwing a fork full of hay from the mow to old Nellie, and tossing a few ears of corn to the razor back pigs. The cow was still out in the woods, some place. She was dry, anyhow.

Clem stood a moment, looking around. The tall dark pine trees were beginning to bend a little, before the rising wind. The snow flakes came down in swirls, along the garden fence. Clem could see very little, in the gathering twilight. The leafless orchard was only a gray blur, the woods beyond, a dark shadow. Otter Creek, on the other side of the gray weathered one story house would have a treacherous covering of ice, before the night ended.

No one would be likely to try to come that way. It had been months now since anyone had visited him. Not since that trouble last summer. Everyone had blamed *him* for what happened, when it wasn't his fault at all. Even his old hunting and drinking companion, Elmer Jackson, never came around any more. Clem sure missed him.

What a fuss people had kicked up, thought Clem, kicking a piece of frozen turf out of the way. Neighbors, police, doctor, and the baby's mother. She was worst of all. And all over a six month old baby! The world was over populated, anyhow. What was one kind, more or less? His own mother had lost five or six —or was it seven?—With one thing or another, and she hadn't made nearly the fuss over all of them, as Lettie Matthews had over one kid.

He told himself there was nothing to be afraid of. Not any more. People forget after awhile.

It was cold and Clem quickened his steps toward the house. He remembered to kick shut the door of the chicken house as he passed. Stopping at the wood pile he gath-

ered up an arm load of wood. No sense in making an extra trip out in the cold night, for wood.

That morning, the radio had predicted a cold night. Once inside by the fire, Clem intended to *stay* inside.

"Might turn into a regular blizzard," he said aloud, squinting ahead through the falling snow. Like many people who live alone, Clem frequently talked to himself, and some times answered. He was a big man. Heavy, round shouldered; a fringe of rusty once red hair encircled his bullet head giving him some what the appearance of a shaven-crowned monk. His eyes, of a peculiar light gray, protruded slightly.

In his younger days—he was now fifty odd—no one could beat him at wrestling. He still walked with a sidling, crouching gait.

As he reached the back steps of the house he dropped a stick of wood, and bent over to retrieve it. It was then that he saw the footprints.

His hand tightened on the stick of wood, as he bent down, staring. They were very small footprints. Like those of a child or a small woman, leading away around the corner of the house, very faint in the new fallen snow.

Slowly he straightened and turned. His pale eyes raked the yard, and peered at the dark brush along the creek. Still gripping the stick of wood, he warily circled the house. His eyes went over the shadowy outlines of the buildings, mysterious appearing through the white veil of snow.

The door of the outhouse swung open on one creaking hinge. No one inside. He went around to the back again and the footprints were gone. Swallowed up. Hidden by the snow.

Her, thought Clem. *Her!* "No," he said. "No, it couldn't have been *her.*" how, he asked himself, could she get out of a place of locks, guards, iron bars set in steel and concrete? The place where she had been sent? For life, they said.

"A homicidal maniac," the authorities called her, when she tried to kill Clem with a butcher knife. And there were many who agreed —but said that Clem had been the cause of it all.

In court that day she had screamed at Clem. "Some day I'll kill you! You killed my baby! I'll get you if it takes a thousand years!"

And people giving Clem dirty looks, and muttering: "Why didn't he hang up and let her *call* the doctor?"

They had taken the woman away, then, and locked her up for life in a big red brick building, at Madison, twenty miles away, with a high fence around it. Clem went to look at it once, standing outside the fence, and came away feeling thankful that it wasn't *him* locked up in a place like that, with crazy people. It would sure be hell.

As he stood there, looking all around, there was a sudden ripping tearing sound, and something dark, like a hawk, or a bird of prey, sailed over his head into the garden fence.

Clem felt a quick fear, before he saw that it was a shingle, off the roof. In his relief he almost laughed.

"Should have fixed that roof before winter," he said. And as for the tracks, they were completely gone. Maybe he'd been mistaken about the tracks, being made by a human. Maybe it had been a large dog.

"It couldn't have been *her*," he assured himself. "Guess I'm imagining things—seeing ghosts—ghosts in the snow."

He hurried inside the small entry. Dark, cold air came out to meet him. He shivered.

He did not see the pale shadow that came away from behind the outhouse, crept across the open space, and folded itself into the darker shadow of the pines.

The kitchen was cold and gathering darkness. The fire in the old black range was nearly out. Clem let fall the wood to the floor beside the stove. He lighted the kerosene lamp on the bare kitchen table, and looked around the room.

Everything appeared as usual. His corner bed, an old couch, really. A mare's nest of old army blankets. His overstuffed chair beside the stove. A corner cupboard with a gap, where one drawer was missing. Shreds of curtains, like gray cob webs, framed the dark windows, with their long, narrow panes. Some flakes came at the windows from the darkness outside. Nothing changed in the room.

He built up the fire. It was nearly out after his absence of several hours, seeing to his scattered traps in the woods and along the creek bank. And with no luck, either. Not a single trap held captive a small, struggling, bundle of fur. The little animals must have sensed the coming storm and retreated to their snug warm holes.

Clem moved the pot of squirrel stew from the back of the stove nearer the front, but not near enough to get hot at once. There was something else to do first.

He sat down in the overstuffed chair, pulled off his wet boots, and tossed them aside.

His eyes glistened as he reached into a cubby hole behind the stove and took out a squat brown gallon jug, whose contents made seductive sounds to his ear.

The McQuade Brothers, back in the Otter Creek hills, made a pretty good grade of whiskey, he allowed, as the liquid fire ran all through him. And much cheaper than whiskey from a liquor store.

He smelled the stew, as it warmed. He was warming up too, from the whiskey and the fire. He felt good inside and outside.

He heard the wind outside in the trees, and saw the snow, coming at the windows. He knew a wonderful feeling of well being.

He was safe. Safe and warm, inside. He didn't know why he had that faint feeling of uneasiness. No reason for it. That crazy woman was locked up, good. He wished he wouldn't think of her tonight, and all that bad time last summer. Everyone down on him. All because he wouldn't give up the line when he was talking to that widow woman, over at Butlerville. And just when he was about to get a yes out of her, when he asked if he could call, here comes that damn Lettie Matthews, screeching in his ear, for him to hang up, get off the line, so she could get a doctor for her baby.

Well.— That sure fixed Clem's chances with the widow and it was enough to make a man mad, and hang onto the phone out of pure stubbornness.

"Probably the kid would have died anyhow," he thought. Kids were always ailing, worrying hell out of their parents. Anyway, Clem had rights, didn't he? He paid taxes didn't he? Fought for his country, too. Had a pension. A leg injury, long since healed.

He guessed he didn't owe anybody anything. You'd think he was poison, way everybody shied away. He wouldn't have minded much, if Elmer had stuck with him.

Sitting by the fire, Clem thought, of the good times he and Elmer had hunting, fishing, some times camping in the old Indian cave above the creek. Sharing a jug.

He'd never forget the time they had come upon that scrawny girl, along a little used back woods path. Looking for a strayed cow. Couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen, could she? Wearing a shift made of flour sacking and nothing else. She lit out like the wind when she saw two strange men creeping up on her, grinning.

They'd caught her, though, hiding in a sassafras thicket. She never told either. She was too scared, when they finally let her go.

Yes. Good times. Until Elmer went to a camp meeting and heard that traveling preacher hollering about hell-fire and brimstone. Now Elmer was no fun at all, any more. Wouldn't even touch beer.

The squirrel stew was steaming. Clem ladled it out into a cracked bowl, and got a heel of dried bread from the corner cupboard.

The snow was coming down faster, and sometimes at a sudden eddy of wind, the snow whirled in a little dance, a little white dance, dancing right up to the window. Clem watched it as he ate, telling himself again how lucky he was to be inside, safe from the storm. Bad night to be out.

He pitched into the stew, sopping the gravy with the bread, and thought of the old mammy squirrel whose bones he was cleaning now. Clem had brought her down from the top of the tall beech yesterday, where she thought she was hiding. But Clem had seen her, peering

warily down at him, and he put the bullet right in the middle of her chest. She had young ones, hidden in the tree; for when he dressed her out on the chopping block, her small breasts were filled with milk.

Females were sure fools about their young ones, he thought. Even the mammy squirrel, dying at his feet, had bared her teeth and tried to fight. He had tossed her whiskered, pixic head to a prowling cat, who seized it hungrily, and ran off behind the barn with the prize.

The stew was pretty good. Clem finished it, put more wood on the fire, and sat, warmed and fed, beside the stove. The jug within reach. A drowsy feeling crept over him.

If only Elmer was here, to keep him company.

Suddenly he sat up, listening. Was that a creaking floor board? A softly turning knob? After a long moment, Clem relaxed. The sound was not repeated.

Of course—he reasoned an old house like this, was bound to have creaks and funny sounds. And with the storm and wind, a night like this, why wouldn't there be strange noises not heard another time?

Presently a sound came, seemingly from inside some where, and Clem sat up, frowning. Another shingle? No—that wasn't what it sounded like. The wind? The snow?

It had been a sort of a sliding sound. So soft as to be almost soundless. Perhaps it was snow, sliding off a pine branch.

The silence held, and he could hear the ticking clock. Almost time for the news. He'd try the radio, see if it was working, pretty soon.

"Don't know what's got into me, tonight," he muttered, working on the jug. "Imagining things."

He sat dozing for a time, in a pleasant alcholic fog. Suddenly he was wide awake again. Something, some sound like a gently closing door had penetrated the fog. Blinking, he looked toward the door to the entry. It was closed. But what of the outer door? Had he failed to fasten it? He'd better go see. Right now.

The snow was coming at the windows, from the darkness beyond. The lamps flickered. The room seemed less warm. Maybe the outer door had blown open.

He came to his feet, stood uneasily, went to the door with his half crouching gait. The back door was closed but not fastened. Clem threw the wooden bolt; and then noticed the wet spots on the floor of the entry. They looked like tracks of some kind.

His heart jumped a little. Tracks, more tracks? Oh—why of course, Clem had made the tracks himself, when he came in from out doors. It had been snowing then.

He had been dreaming, in by the warm fire, that's what. He turned back to the warm kitchen, drawing the door closed behind him.

He did not think to look behind the door. He did not see the pale shape flattened to the wall, a shadow with blazing eyes and long, wild white hair.

The clock made a soft ticking sound. The small radio sat on a table against the wall. Would it work? Maybe Clem could get some local news, a weather report, and learn about how long the snow storm would continue.

He turned the knobs, dialing the local station. At first he heard only a high, singing sound. Then a series of clicks and the singing changed to a roar. He turned the knobs, tried again. This time he heard a distant voice, sounding strange and eerie as it came over the miles of snow and wind, as from another world. Bits of disconnected sentences. A few words.

"Early this morning . . . are . . . unknown eluded . . . guards . . . warning . . . armed and danger—" the newcaster's voice faded away.

Must have been a jail break, some where, thought Clem. Wonder if it was anyone he knew? He listened to the wind. The other sound, what ever it was, was gone.

He was safe inside; safe and warm, with the door locked. Why should he have a funny feeling, in the pit of his stomach?

Maybe it was the whiskey. Could it be that the McQuade Brother's whiskey wasn't up to par? Hadn't been aged long enough?

The red light from the chinks in front of the stove threw flickering shadows across the walls and ceiling, and was reflected in the window panes, until it looked like a fire outside, burning up the snow.

A stealthy sound drew him up from his chair. He strained his ears, hearing nothing, and shook his head, angrily, impatient with himself.

"For God's sake," he muttered. What was the matter with him tonight? Jumping at every sound that way. Through the dark windows, he saw the snow, hurtling through the night, toward him. Heard the wind in the pine trees.

The clock ticked away on the shelf. He looked around the room. Nothing but shadows. Nothing *in* the shadows.

Gradually he relaxed. He looked at the wall phone, between the door and windows. He believed he'd call old Elmer. It would be good to hear his voice. He needed to talk to some one. He'd tell Elmer how cozy he was, here by the fire, with his jug —and how he wished Elmer was here, too. Elmer ought to be about fed up with that religious stuff, by now. Ready for some fun.

But when Clem took down the receiver two women were talking. He heard only parts of the conversation, but what he heard was enough.

"Hear the news, Birdy?"

". . . on the radio."

"Poor thing . . . found yet?"

"Even got out? . . ."

That jail break, thought Clem.

"Way I heard it . . . white uniforms like the help wears . . . gun away from the . . ."

"Poor crazy Lettie . . . half frozen by now."

Clem froze to attention. Lettie! Why that was the crazy woman they were talking about, the one that had threatened to kill him. "If it takes a thousand years," she had said. It had been *Lettie* they were talking about on the news cast! She had somehow managed to get out of that place. Maybe she was out there now in the snow, looking at him through the window. Maybe she had been brooding all the time she was in that place. Planning escape. Planning revenge. Planning murder. *His* murder.

"If it takes a thousand years!" she had said.

It wasn't possible, he told himself, wildly. Not even a crazy person would come through this storm, through the freezing creek, or the dark, snowy woods.

The flame of the light was flickering. The shadows in the room rose and fell, rose and fell.

The women were still talking.

". . . said she would . . . reckon she . . . dead by morning . . ."

"Mabel . . . some one on the line?"

Clem found his voice.

"It's me!" he shouted. "Hang up, quick! I got to call the sheriff."

He heard a sound of movement, some where. Maybe it *wasn't* the wind . . .

"For God's sake!" screamed Clem. "Hang up! I heard something! Help!"

Ribald laughter answered him.

"I got rights!" screamed Clem. "You got no right to hold the line when I got to call for help! I got rights I tell you!"

His hand clutched the receiver desperately. A gun—the woman had a gun—

"What did he say, Birdy?"

"Something about rights. ha!"

The lamp made a whispering sound. Clem heard a sound, not of the wind. Felt a chill, not of the cold. There was a small dark opening in the door. He could not take his eyes from the slowly widening crack. He stood like one paralyzed.

He made a last desperate appeal. "Hang up! Before it's too late—"

The door opening was wider. There was something white in the darkness outside the door.

"Help!" screamed Clem. "Call somebody! It's her—white, like a ghost! Do something—help, help!"

The ghost like figure moved toward him. His voice locked in his throat. The receiver slid from his nerveless hand.

The gun, pressed against his chest, made hardly any noise.

Clem made a long, slow slide, along the wall, to lay slumped on the floor. The black receiver, on the curling cord, swung gently back and forth, just above his glazing eyes.

Voices came out of the receiver.

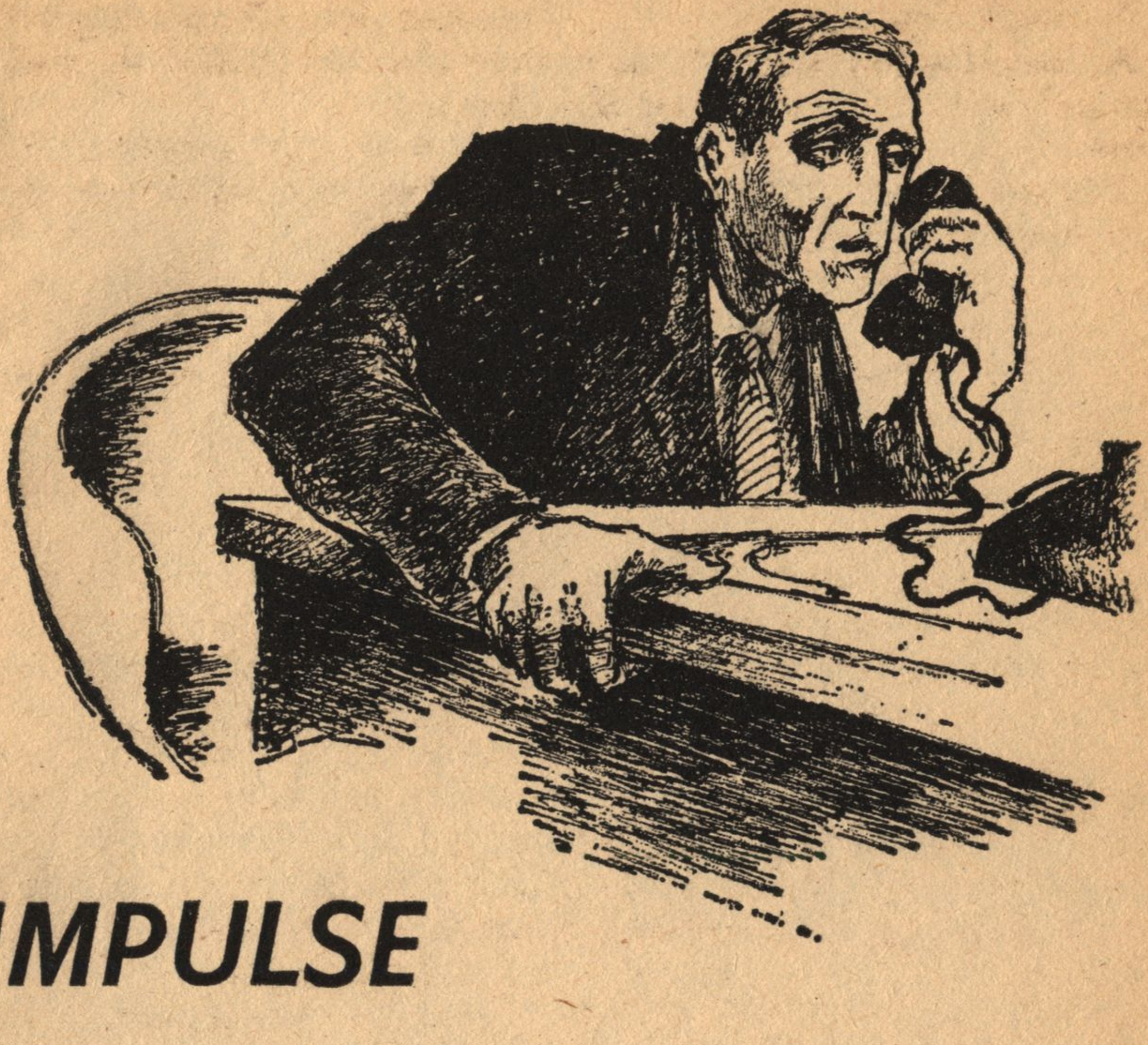
". . . Hear something?"

"... wind, blowing ..."

A thin, translucent hand came out and replaced the receiver on the hook.

The pale shadow with fiery eyes and long white hair drew back, drawing close a long, pale gray coat, and silently vanished through the doorway.

It was still snowing. Before morning the footprints would be gone.



IMPULSE

BY PAUL CURTIS

He was desperate. He couldn't think. There was only one thing to do . . . he just barely caught the plane to Mexico.

He'd just shaken hands with a departing bank customer when the inter-com button at the base of the phone on his desk lighted and buzzed.

"Yes, Marie?" responded James Glenning after tabbing in on the line. He glanced across the busy network of other customer service desks and teller's compartments as he settled into his chair again. It was the usual last-minute Friday night push. He was looking forward to the pleasant suburban reprieve the weekend always offered.

"There's a call for you on exten-

sion three, Mr. Glenning," the soft, low voice of Marie Hines informed him.

He dutifully punched onto another lighted phone trunk button. "Mr. Glenning speaking. May I help you?"

A hoarsely-disguised male voice rasped, "Yes, we think you can. A hundred thousand dollars worth of help, Mr. Glenning."

Jim frowned at the receiver. "Now, listen, I haven't time for—"

"You listen. Listen very carefully. Just sit there nice and quietly—don't call any attention to yourself. Now here's your wife."

"W-What? My—!"

"Jim? Oh, please! Please do whatever they say!" sobbed a woman's frightened voice. "They f-forced their way into our house! They have guns! They'll kill Larry and me if you don't—!"

Jim Glenning had frozen behind the desk, numbed beyond the ability to think by her imperative, terror-wrought pleas.

"Karen?" He'd half risen from his chair as her voice was abruptly choked off.

"She's perfectly safe. So is your son. Providing you do exactly as I tell you." It was the guttural tones of the man who'd first spoken to Jim. He instructed the shocked young bank executive to appear calm and act normally so as not to arouse suspicions. He told Jim Glenning to load $100,000 in small denomination, unmarked bills into his attache case and walk out of the bank with it at closing time.

"I can't do that!" Jim said tersely, holding the telephone cupped closely to his lips. He stared nervously around the modern, well-lighted bank interior. No one seemed to be aware that a vicious robbery attempt was in deadly process. That the lives of a woman and a 7-year-old boy were forfeit if he failed to comply with those coldly-calculated demands.

"You're a department head. You have access to the vault," relentlessly prodded that invisible menace. "Get the money. Walk out of there with it twenty minutes from now. Climb in your car and drive to the airport. There's a flight reservation in your name at the Trans-National desk. Be on the 10:03 P.M. flight to Mexico City. Got that much?"

"I—yes, I understand," Jim mumbled. He was sweating profusely although the building was comfortably air-conditioned. He was startled by the sudden approach of a subordinate. He hadn't seen the other man leave his desk and walk across the carpeted area towards him.

"Check into the Vista Hotel when you arrive in Mexico City. Register under the name of John Griffin. Someone will contact you there. Turn over the money, then stay put. Our contact will call us and if everything went according to plan, your wife and son won't be harmed. You can come back on

Sunday. By then, they'll be home, waiting for you."

Jim shook his head, waving off the junior departmental executive who'd wanted to ask him about something. The younger man had given him a curious look, then had shrugged and returned to where a middle-aged couple was waiting beside his desk.

"Why can't I just leave the money some place?" Jim Glenning asked in a shaken undertone. "This doesn't have to be dragged out. I'll get the money. I'll bring it anywhere in the city you say. You can hold me hostage so I can't notify the police. My wife and boy wouldn't tell anyone—not while you were holding me."

"This will be done our way, Glenning. No shortcuts, and no tricks. By the number. Just like I gave it to you."

"Yes. All right," Jim said heavily, realizing that the unidentified enemy held all the trump cards. "But let me talk to my wife again. Let me tell her that I'm going to do just what you want and—" His voice trailed off at the sharp finality of the click severing the connection.

The departmental assistant who'd been talking with the pair of middle-aged customers again rose from behind a nearby desk, seeing Jim Glenning slowly replace the receiver and sit staring at it.

"Mr. Glenning, I wonder if you could help me explain to Mr. and Mrs. Thomson about our new incentive savings plan? They—" He stared at the attache case Jim now held.

"Sorry. Not now," Jim said brusquely. He shoved back in the chair and got up, walking rapidly away from the bewildered younger official, carrying the empty case.

It was already 8:43 P.M.

Jim flashed an anxious look at the ornate electric clock built into the paneled wall above the teller's windows as he strode through the crowded bank.

Whoever was responsible for the incredible scheme to execute a crime of such magnitude had deliberately made an ally of time.

Several employees smiled and spoke to him while he walked past the cashier's section and beyond, heading towards the vault.

He tried to return their casual smiles and nods. His face felt like a hideous death mask when he forced himself to grin to conceal the throbbing pangs of terror beating at him.

No one challenged him when he entered the shelf-lined room with impregnable walls and an elaborately-wired alarm system. He'd automatically complied with the security precautions required of the handful of bank officers who were authorized to have access to the vault.

A neatly-banded packet of 20's fell to the floor. Jim hastily stooped and snatched up the money, cramming it into the attache case. He couldn't make his hands quit shaking. Before when he'd entered the vault to

deposit or withdraw funds in the everyday course of his job, he'd never been so short of breath, so maddeningly clumsy.

It was only a matter of minutes before other executives began parading back there with coins and currency to be lodged in the vault over the weekend. Even while there were still customers at the windows, some of the staff members closed out, directing people to another cage.

Jim paused to sleeve the searing sweat out of his blurred eyes. He'd already stuffed more than $60,000 into the attache case. He'd been working with money most of his adult life. Yet, he'd never realized what a formidable bulk the sum demanded of him would be. By the time he finished hurriedly scooping bundles of banknotes into the case, he had a devilish time getting the case to close.

Another vice-president was just coming towards the walk-through vault portal when Jim Glenning emerged with the money he'd stolen. Jim felt like a thief. He was afraid he looked as guilty and unnerved as he felt.

"Well, this about wraps up another week," cordially said the other man. "I suppose you and the family will be out sailing around on Emerald Lake again this weekend."

Jim summoned a dry-lipped smile as he stepped past his fellow-executive. "Could be, George. Depends on the weather and on what sort of schedule Karen has mapped out for us," he said as easily as he could manage.

As he left the rear of the bank and walked amid the desks and billing machines arranged behind the teller's cubicles, Jim's thoughts flashed back to that morning.

His son Larry had talked eagerly during breakfast about another family fishing excursion on the nearby lake where their new runabout was moored.

Summer was almost over. In less than 3 weeks, Larry would be beginning his 2nd grade year at the suburban public school.

If he was still alive.

If the unknown gunman or gunmen threatening Karen and their son fulfilled that part of the ugly barter.

The $100,000 that was a leaden weight within the attache case he propped beside his desk. In exchange for the lives of his wife and boy.

Jim sank into the chair, his tormented gaze encountering the telephone by which the invisible menace had intimidated him.

He had an urgent impulse to pick up the receiver. To dial the number of his house. Or to call the police and have them speed out in force to surround the place.

But what was it that hard, unrelenting masculine voice had told him? Every commanding word was sharply etched in Jim Glenning's fear-clouded mind.

The man had told him he could return on Sunday after yielding the money to someone who would contact him at the Mexico City Hotel he was to register at. That when he came back, his family would again be at home, waiting for him.

That meant that no one was at the house now.

Jim darted another anguished stare at the clock. Only minutes remaining until 9:00 P.M. Most of the customers were gone, already. Only a few men and women were still standing at the compartment windows.

"Your'e as pale as a ghost. Are you ill, Jim?"

Those words of quiet concern caused Jim Glenning's hand to flinch visibly away from the beige phone receiver. He swiveled around and stared up at the tall, bespectacled male who had silently materialized at his shoulder.

"I—no, that is nothing serious, Alan," Jim said, meeting the older man's questioning gaze.

He'd decided to dial the number of the phone at the house, hoping that his family and whoever held them captive might still be there. He wanted to talk to Karen again. To make sure that she and Larry wouldn't be harmed if he did as he'd been instructed.

But now he couldn't make that call.

Alan Reese shook up cigarettes, extending the pack to Jim. "Lots of summer flu making the rounds. Hope one of those bugs hasn't nipped you, Jim."

Jim refused the proferred smoke, wishing there was some way he could use the phone.

"Maybe, that's what it is," he muttered, watching the greying first vice-president who was his immediate superior leisurely select, then light a cigarette. "A touch of flu." Jim moistened his lips. His throat was dry. He did feel sick. And more confused and scared that he'd ever imagined anyone could be. "Was there something you wanted to talk about, Alan?"

"Nothing that can't wait until Monday." The flawlessly-polished tip of one of Alan Reese's shoes gently nudged the side of the attache case leaning against Jim's walnut desk. "Better leave that here this weekend."

Jim Glenning shot a wild-eyed glance up at the older executive. "No, I cant'! That is, there's work in there that I have to get caught up on. I always put in a few hours cleaning up odds and ends at home over the weekend."

"You shouldn't push yourself. Not if you're coming down with something. Why not ease off, Jim? Get some rest. The work will keep."

"I—if I don't feel up to it, I won't even open the bag," Jim said, dying a little inside with every tick of the clock. He swung back to the desk and began hurriedly sorting and stacking the accumulation of paperwork that remained unfinished.

He hoped that Alan Reese would leave. He saw that some of the other bank employees were already following the last of the customers out past the guards stationed at the entrance.

His hopes were dashed when two other men left their adjacent desks and walked over to indulge in conversation with the executive standing only a few feet from him.

Jim stowed the sheaf of correspondence, credit ratings and statements of accounts in one of the drawers, then locked the desk and stood up.

He was reaching down for the attache case when the youthful trainee functioning as one of his assistants apologetically said, "I didn't mean to bother you before, Mr. Glenning. It was just that those people couldn't seem to understand the difference between a time and a demand savings account."

Jim completed his reach for the handle of the tan leather case. He straightened with it, saying, "I'm sorry I couldn't help you, Dave. You finally got the idea across to them?"

The younger man grinned and nodded. "After a fashion, at least. Don't be surprised, though, if they're back next week to ask you about it!"

Alan Reese detached himself from the pair of junior executives and clapped a friendly hand to Jim's shoulder. "Remember, now. No burning the midnight oil if you don't feel up to it. See you at lunch Monday noon."

Jim Glenning did his best to grin and make his departure appear normal. He exchanged goodnights with the guard at the side door opening out to the darkened parking lot and walked rapidly towards his car with the attache case hanging heavy in his perspiring grasp.

The airport he'd been directed to drive to was located on the opposite side of the city. A minimum of a 30-minute drive. Longer if the Friday night traffic was dense.

Jim tossed the case on the front seat and slid in behind the wheel. He started the engine and looked at his watch, holding it in the dim reflection of the dashlights. Almost 9:15 P.M. The flight he was supposed to be on took off at 10:03 P.M.

There wasn't time to search for a phone and try to call the house. He couldn't risk missing that plane.

A one-way passage had been reserved in his name. Jim took the flight coupon from the airlines clerk and received the information that the flight would be loading from Gate 9 in a matter of moments.

He turned from the reservations desk, swiftly scanning the massive airline terminal for the public pay phones. He spotted the cluster of glass-enclosed booths but he saw it was no use. A number of impatient men and women hovered outside the phone booths, waiting for their turns while other people tied up every available instrument.

Was he being watched?

Jim Glenning stared hard at the milling sea of faces. He saw no one he recognized. He heard the flight despatcher announce that the southwest-bound plane someone had booked him out on was loading at Gate 9.

Even if he could have gotten to a phone, what good would that have done? By then, Karen and Larry had probably been forced to accompany their captor or captors from the house to some remote hideout. But suppose they were still at the house? If he had succeeded in making the call, he might only have aggravated whoever was holding his loved ones hostage.

The flight became airborne right on schedule. Jim Glenning and the other passengers were told they could unfasten their seat belts. Jim stared out at the blackness beyond the plane window while people seated around him talked and laughed, enjoying the long, swift streak across the skies.

He hadn't slept at all. And that damned attache case with its despicable contents was still tucked beneath his arm when he crossed the sunlit lobby of the *Vista Hotel*.

"Your first visit to Mexico City, Mr. Griffin?" inquired the desk clerk, handing a key to a uniformed bellboy. "Will you be with us long?"

Jim nodded after signing the register as John Griffin. "No, not long," he said. He shook his head when the bronzed, wiry youth in the bright-buttoned carmine uniform wanted to take the attache case. The bellhop turned and led the way towards the elevators.

No matter how fitfully Jim Glenning paced the attractive 11th floor suite he'd been assigned, his mounting anxiety failed to hasten the arrival of the mysterious 'someone' he expected.

Weariness eventually got the better of him. He sagged down on the edge of the bed, staring dull-eyed at the attache case which no one had come to claim.

The room was dark and he didn't know where he was at first when the loud poundings on the door awakened him hours later.

He stumbled across the room, groping for the wall switch. The light from the twin table lamps poured out into the hall when he opened the door.

Two men stared in at him. Both were Mexicans, both regarding him with wary intentness.

"You are James Glenning?" It was the shorter of the men who spoke.

Jim nodded, his mind too drugged from the deep slumber he'd been roused from to notice that they'd used his right name and not the alias he'd registered under.

He looked at the credentials exhibited by the man who'd addressed him. He gave way, backing into the shadowy hotel room as the Mexican police officers moved purposefully after him. He was sufficiently awake

by then to be cognizant of the gun that covered him while the taller plainclothesman expertly frisked him for any possible weapon.

They refused to listen when he attempted to explain about the $100,000 they confiscated. They made him accompany them to the Mexico City police headquarters building.

"This was extremely foolish on your part, Mr. Glenning," said the U.S. law enforcement official who had secured the necessary extradition documents by late Sunday morning. "It might help if you tell us what you did with the other two hundred thousand dollars."

It didn't matter who he talked to. Or how desperately he tried to explain what he'd been doing there in a Mexico City hotel with $100,000 which he admitted taking from the bank.

No one gave any credence to his frantic pleas to check and see what had happened to his family. He was flown back to the same airport where he'd boarded a flight less than 48 hours earlier. He was escorted into another police station and asked the same infuriating series of questions.

"They'd have killed my wife and son if I hadn't done exactly as they ordered! What missing two hundred thousand dollars? I told you, I took only the amount I was instructed to take," Jim Glenning repeatedly replied to those questions.

None of it was making any sense to him. He felt as if he was acting out some crazy role in a hideous nightmare.

Then, on Monday morning, he was led back into the interrogation office. And he stared at the lovely, dark-haired woman who'd cried out his name.

"Karen! Oh, thank God you're all right!" Jim tore away from the man who'd brought him into the room. He and his wife clung wildly to each other.

She stared blankly up into his haggard features when he asked if Larry was safe, too.

"Safe? Why, from what, darling?"

Jim blinked, trying to clear away some of the murky cobwebs that refused to free his badly-jumbled thoughts.

He shook Karen's shoulders, harshly saying, "Tell them about Friday night! Tell them I had to take that money!"

Dazed, anguished tears of bewilderment welled in his wife's eyes as she stared mutely up at him.

"Ohh, Jim! W-Why did you do this?" she whispered. "We w-were so happy! We didn't—need that money."

They were separated by one of the officers. Jim was led to a chair beside the desk. He was forced to sit there and listen while his wife denied that anyone had threatened either her or Larry. She told the man who'd asked about Friday night that they'd been home all evening, waiting for Jim. The tele-

phone hadn't rung and she hadn't called anyone, either.

The full impact of her stricken words didn't hit Jim Glenning until hours afterwards when he was stretched out on a cot in one of the cells.

He was facing indictment for the theft of $300,000.

Everyone—even his wife—believed that he'd been caught absconding with a portion of the money he'd stolen.

He'd admitted taking $100,000.

There never had been a gun pointed at Karen and Larry. Whoever had called him at the bank Friday night hadn't been anywhere near the house.

A gigantic hoax.

A horribly daring bluff.

And he'd swallowed the act that someone had so convincingly staged. He'd panicked at the thought of the potential death menacing his family. He'd accepted the voice of that sobbing woman as his wife's terrified pleas for him to do as he was told.

But who?

Jim sat up on the cot. It was quiet in the dusky cell block where he'd been confined. They'd taken his watch but it must have been long past midnight by then.

At least one man. And a woman.

They'd never intended to have anyone contact him at the hotel in Mexico City. They'd planned for him to be taken into custody.

No! They'd planned it that way!

Jim Glenning lunged off the cot. His fingers tightened convulsively around the steel bars. Oh, what a snug, sweet frame it was!

Someone had the missing $200,000.

The same someone and his female accomplice who'd staged that realistic telephone drama with timetable preciseness.

And that someone, that unknown, invisible menace had to be employed at the bank.

More than that. Whoever had taken the additional money from the vault had to be a man Jim knew; one of less than a dozen executives with the authority to enter the electronically-guarded money room.

A man and a woman employed at the bank. The telephone call hadn't come in on an outside line. They'd been in one of the private offices. They'd—

Jim banged his hands against the bars, yelling for the guard at the top of his lungs.

Dawn was clawing feebly at the Monday sky when an annoyed young brunette cautiously peered out through the narrow opening of an apartment door.

Marie Hines gasped as the door was rudely thrust inward by the shoulder of her unexpected visitor.

"M-Mr. Glenning! W-What—how did you—?"

Jim Glenning did a poor job of closing the door he'd rammed open. It was still ajar as he stalked toward the brunette.

"They had to let me out on bail, Marie. Why are you so surprised? Didn't you and your boyfriend give me credit for having any brains at all? Surely you must have known that I'd eventually figure things out."

She clutched nervously at her robe, still backing away from the slowly-advancing intruder.

"P-Please! I—I don't know what you're doing here, Mr. Glenning! What you're talking about," she stammered shrilly.

"Now, you sound like you did on the telephone Friday night. When you posed as my wife. I was too jolted at the time to notice any such vocal discrepancies." Jim paused, unhurriedly surveying the dim room.

It was an expensive apartment, lavishly furnished. Much too extravagant for a girl whose take-home pay was less than $70 a week.

Marie Hines watched him prowl around. Her hands twisted constantly at the belted folds of her white terrycloth robe.

"Get out of here!" she finally blurted. "You have no right busting in on me like this! I'll call the police if you—"

"Good idea. Just what I was thinking of doing," Jim quietly said, cutting in on her heated tirade. "While they're here, they can ask the super or some of the other tenants about your regular visitor. The banker boyfriend no one is supposed to know about."

"—" Marie Hines stared helplessly at the grim-faced man so calmly confronting her. "He's married. I—I don't want to get him involved in this. Just go—leave me alone, Mr. Glenning. You—"

"How much of the money that's still missing do you have, Marie? None of it, probably. I tried to see your boyfriend. But I was too late. By now, he's long gone with both your share and his."

The girl gave Jim a wild-eyed look. Then, she defiantly shook back her dark hair, saying, "You took that three hundred thousand! There's no reason why Alan should run!"

Alan. Alan Reese. Suave, socially correct Alan Reese with his elegant wardrobe and handsomely-greying impeccability.

Jim Glenning's boss.

And Marie Hines' mysterious lover.

"Alan's wife hasn't seen him since this morning," Jim said, adlibbing the greatest bluff he'd ever tried. He laughed, turning carelessly away from the jittery brunette. "Figure it out for yourself, Marie. He used both of us. Me as a red herring. While the police were busy with me, he skipped the country for parts unknown with the money he'd promised to split with you. We were both suckers."

"No! He wouldn't! He loves me!"

"Love? Wise up and face the truth for once in your life, Marie! All Alan Reese ever loved was

money—and the power that goes with it."

She rushed furiously past Jim, snatching up the telephone receiver. "I don't believe you! He swore he'd take me with him—after you were sent to prison!"

"Don't bother to dial the rest of that number, Miss Hines."

Marie Hines whirled, uttering a startled little shriek as a brace of detectives pushed into the apartment from where they'd been listening outside the door.

Jim Glenning indulged in the luxury of a lazy, untroubled yawn and stretch a few hours later that balmy and cloudless Monday morning.

"Then it was Alan Reese who pretended to discover the shortage," Jim's lovely wife Karen said while she began unbuttoning his shirt there in the bedroom of their home. "After he'd taken an additional two hundred thousand dollars from the vault."

Jim nodded, having considerable difficulty keeping his eyes propped open. "One of the first vice-president's duties is to check the vault before it's closed and secured for the weekend. That gave him the perfect opportunity to set me up. Some of the other executives verified part of the story he gave the police. They all had to agree that I'd been acting peculiarly. I looked guilty; I felt guilty."

"Right now, you just look like a pooped papa to us, doesn't he, Larry?" Karen's soft hands adoringly stroked Jim Glenning's cheeks as she smiled at their son in the bedroom doorway.

Jim was fuzzily conscious of their lighthearted laughter as he oozed down onto the enveloping comfort of the bed. He felt extraordinarily rich as he yielded to the velvet smog swirling over him.

He was safely at home with his loved ones.

And he wasn't due at the bank until tomorrow morning.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

BY CLAYTON MATTHEWS

At the age of forty-some years, George Reardon began dipping into the till of the bank where he'd worked some fifteen odd years as a teller . . . and suddenly life took on greater meaning.

WHAT would you do if you were forty years old, walking along the street with a man you knew well and you turned your head aside for just a moment, heard brakes scream, tires squeal, and you glanced back to find him dying under the wheels of a truck?

After the shock wore off you'd probably think what a waste, you'd think you'd worked with the man for fifteen years in the same bank and you'd have the feeling that your life was running out through your fingers. Your past had been as colorless as the dead man's, insofar as you knew of his, and the future even bleaker. Then you'd likely dismiss it from your mind and return to the treadmill.

Not George Reardon. He decided to do something about it. He

didn't decide on the spot, for he went back to the treadmill, back to his job behind the teller's window, but he went back a different George Reardon. A change was already taking place in him. Later, he liked to think of it as a seed being planted. Not that he had a horticultural turn of mind, but it seemed an apt simile. That all came later, of course, when he looked back to the moment it began.

They'd been to lunch together, George and Art Thomas, and were on their way back when the accident occurred. After telling and retelling it to the bank employees, trying to explain how Art could have fallen in front of the truck when George himself didn't know the answer to that, George finally got settled down to work. All afternoon he kept glancing around for Art. Art was . . . had been the vault teller. He relieved during the tellers' lunch hours and rest periods, all except George. As the only two male tellers in the Bailey Corners First National Bank, Art thought it only proper they lunch together.

Art was missed in another respect, too. As the vault teller, it had been his duty to check each teller's cash after closing and lock it in the vault.

Today, Leonard Fairchild, the vice president, did that. Mr. Fairchild was a jovial man of sixty. He had been vice president from long before George went to work at the bank. Three men had been promoted over him to president. Mr. Fairchild wanted it that way. He wasn't ambitious, his money needs weren't large, and he didn't have the top man's responsibility. Not that he didn't have the bank's interest at heart. He had a mother hen's concern for newly-hatched chicks and a manner of clucking much the same. Some said he really ran the bank, the president being nothing more than a higher-salaried figurehead. And it was certainly true that Mr. Fairchild made most of the decisions and endeavored to keep his finger on the pulse of the bank.

Today, he was far from jovial. He went about totaling the cash with a funereal face.

When he checked George out, he said in a low voice, "Drop by my desk before you leave, George. We have something to discuss. Poor Art." He clucked, clucked again. "Sad, sad." He went off shaking his head.

It was after five when George stopped at Mr. Fairchild's desk in the front of the bank. Everyone else had left for the day.

George took the chair indicated by Mr. Fairchild and waited while the man fussed with objects on his desk and finally looked up with a clearing of his throat. "Art's passing leaves a vacancy to be filled, George. I've decided you're the man for that. There'll be a raise in salary, and eventually you'll be elected an officer of the bank. The

semi-annual audit is only two months off. Due to the short space of time it is my decision not to order a special audit, as would be the case ordinarily in the appointment of a new head teller. You're familiar enough with Art's duties, I'm certain, to step right in and take over where he left off. Poor Art. We will all miss him." He clucked, then smiled for the first time as though to indicate that was the last cluck due poor Art. He came to his feet with outstretched hand. "Congratulations, George!"

George also got to his feet, accepted the handclasp and said automatically, "Thank you, sir."

Departing the bank, George was far from that euphoric state of mind commonly associated with a promotion and a salary increase.

The salary increase was minimal and the promotion only meant increased responsibilities. The chance of further promotion would await the decease, retirement or discharge of Mr. Fairchild and that prospect, even if imminent and it wasn't, failed to cheer George.

The George Reardon of before Art's passing would undoubtedly have been all aglow. But this was a far different George.

The new George's first departure from the norm involved a stop at a liquor store and the purchase of a bottle of whiskey. Then George went home to his bachelor apartment where he had moved after Mother's death three years before. He didn't even bother checking on the pair of lovebirds caged in the living room but made straight for the kitchen where he built himself a dark bourbon on the rocks, a man's drink he had learned about from watching TV crime dramas.

Not being accustomed to strong liquor, especially in such sudden and rapid doses, he soon achieved that euphoric state not enduced by Mr. Fairchild's news. He also stumbled into bed without dinner and awoke the next morning with a crashing hangover, alll matters of small importance, since he also awoke to the first full day as the new George and a revelation. The revelation, oddly enough, concerned his new job as head teller. He couldn't understand why he hadn't seen it right away.

It was the perfect spot for what he had in mind.

George was going to embezzle the Bailey Corners First National for all the traffic would bear and only as the vault teller could he hope to steal respectable sums with impunity.

He had a brief breakfast, mostly black coffee, and thought with mounting excitement of what he planned to do.

His thoughts were interrupted by the chirping of the lovebirds. He had forgotten to feed them last night. There had been six birds when Mother died. One of the first things he would do was get rid of the birds.

"Mother, you wouldn't approve of that," he said aloud and chuckled.

But then Mother wouldn't have approved of any of the things he was going to do.

He fed the birds, then took a shower and went to his clothes closet in the bedroom. His five suits were drab, conservative, three black, two gray. Mother had selected three of them. And the two he'd bought since had been sold him by the same salesman.

George knew how he looked in those clothes: a nonentity, a slight man with a round face, brown eyes and a pale complexion, brown hair already thinning. Fortunately his figure was still trim, without a paunch. All the exercise he got was the walk to and from the bank every day, but he ate very little. He ate, as Mother had been fond of saying, like a bird.

The acquisition of new clothes was definitely the first order of business.

Dressed, he walked the half dozen blocks to the bank. It was an early autumn day, the morning cool with the promise of heat later. Bailey Corners was a small town of five thousand or so in the rich agricultural region of the Sacramento Valley.

In the bank he was greeted with a shade more respect this morning, as befitted his new position. The female tellers eyed him appraisingly.

And that was another thing—a girl. George had never had a girl, not really. There had been a few, but Mother had never approved of them. Mother had had a firm hand in all phases of his life. And somehow it hadn't seemed worth the trouble since her death. Too, there was his fear of being rebuffed. Now, if everything went as planned, there would be no rebuffs.

There were ten girls in the bank: blondes, brunettes, redheads, ages from twenty-two to sixty, married and unmarried. Covertly he studied them all morning. There were a few who might qualify, but he knew he was playing a game, a game new and exciting to him, and one merely for his own amusement. It would never do to pick a girl from the bank. They would wonder at the source of his sudden affluence.

As George set the time lock on the vault that afternoon after stowing away the cash, he heard Mr. Fairchild come up behind him. George didn't look around with a start of guilt but instead turned slowly.

Mr. Fairchild said, "How did it go, George, the first day?"

"Fine, Mr. Fairchild. Just fine."

"Good, good!" Mr. Fairchild said with a cluck of approval. "It'll get easier as the days pass."

When George left the bank, there was a hundred dollars in his pocket that hadn't been there that morning. Having decided on embezzlement, he saw no valid reason for delay. Contrary to all he'd read

about embezzlers, the money didn't make him at all uneasy. Indeed, it was a very comforting thickness in his pocket.

Several times in the past he had considered getting a job in a bank in either Fresno or Sacramento, a larger bank, a larger city. Now he was glad he hadn't. The new banking machines were making embezzlement difficult, if not impossible. But the Bailay Corners First National had none of the IBM innovations. In Mr. Fairchild's opinion none of them were necessary. The human touch was still needed in banking.

George was glad for that human touch.

On Saturday George took the bus to Fresno and bought two new suits with all the trimmings. One suit was an Italian blue silk, the other a colorful English tweed. Each suit cost almost a month's salary.

Mother would have been scandalized, as would Mr. Fairchild. But neither would ever see the suits.

Unless Mother was watching from Heaven, something George doubted very much. And if she were, it was even better. She was powerless to prevent it.

George regretted one thing. He had never owned a car, and he had a strong hankering for one of the sporty Mustangs currently so popular, but he knew a car was taboo. People would notice and begin to wonder.

The clothes he didn't intend wearing in Bailey Corners, only on the weekend trips to Fresno, Sacramento or San Francisco. His apartment had a private entrance, and he could come and go unobserved.

By the end of the second week, George had stolen over three thousand dollars.

And he had learned not to be self-conscious in the new clothes. He had learned to drink and thoroughly enjoy it. He had even been to the races once and enjoyed that as well.

It was now time for the next step. He was ready to find a girl. He began his search in the Fresno bars.

Mother would have been horrified. Nice girls didn't frequent bars!

George didn't want a nice girl. Oh, he wanted a nice *looking* girl, but he wanted one that would have shocked the pants off Mother.

She wasn't difficult to find. She had blonde hair like a beehive, baby-blue eyes and, in the jargon he was learning to use, she was stacked. Even George's calculator brain was overwhelmed by her awesome measurements.

There was nothing subtle about the way she arranged their meeting. Even George, with his vast inexperience, recognized it for the hoary gambit it was and was delighted.

It was seven o'clock on a Saturday night, and George was in a Fresno bar in his Italian blue silk, working on his second bourbon on the rocks.

A throaty voice said, "Sir, do you have a light?"

George glanced around. The bar was half-empty and there were any number of available stools, yet she had chosen the one next to him.

He picked his lighter up from the bar and thumbed it for her. There was nothing subtle about her perfume, either. It was powerful, potent, erotic as a kiss. When she leaned in for the light, it arose from the depths of her daring cleavage like scented steam. George's nostrils twitched like a rabbit's.

Seeing no glass before her, he gallantly offered to buy her a drink. Her blue eyes underwent a considerable increase in voltage, and she said demurely, "I'll have a vodka gimlet with salt on the rim."

And how do you like them apples, Mother, he said silently, suffering one of his rare grammatical lapses.

Her name was Gwendolyn. "Gwen, for short," she said with a twinkle. "I don't like Gwendolyn, do you? It's so . . . old-fashioned and I'm anything but old-fashioned."

She used a pale lipstick, but she had a habit of running the tip of a pink tongue around her lips after each drink as though loath to lose even a smidgen, and this left them full and glistening and, somehow, blood-red.

George murmured something appropriate to her question, if it was a question.

And that set the pattern for the evening. Gwen was a great talker. George made little effort to understand her chatter. Her voice was pleasant and her talk concerned, to a great extent, herself. She asked him very little about himself. Later, he recalled she never once asked him what he did.

Of course, early on, he had let her have a good look at the thick roll of bills he carried and that, he was certain, answered any immediate questions she might have in that area.

He listened in a happy daze, bought drinks when their glasses were empty, inhaled her perfume which she renewed from time to time during hourly visits to the powder room.

They had dinner. Somewhere. All George remembered was a tab for thirty dollars which he paid gladly.

After dinner she wanted to dance. George had never learned.

Gwen said, "Then I'll teach you."

Either she was an excellent teacher or his alcoholic consumption had been such that he didn't know the difference. He thought he learned quite well. Certainly he enjoyed it.

Somewhere during the evening she started calling him Georgie-Porgie. This delighted him no end. Dimly he realized most men would have belted any woman who called them by such a ridiculous name.

George had never had a nickname, at least never one voiced to his face. To Mother he had never been anything but George. Endear-

ments hadn't been a part of her vocabulary.

Gwen had her own apartment. It was frilly, feminine and filled with a conglomeration of scents as powerful as her perfume. The place teemed with dolls, stuffed animals, et cetera. Couches, pillows, the bed, were fluffy and deep and soft, and George felt as though he floated on a scented cloud.

Technically, George was not a virgin. For all practical purposes on that particular evening he was. Certainly under Gwen's teachings he felt as inept as any schoolboy.

But he learned.

When Gwen let him out early the next morning with a, "Goodbye for now, Georgie-Porgie," he was as hooked as any drug addict.

Gwen was great fun. She was also very expensive. She liked good food and drink, *loved* the best floor shows in the top clubs. She also liked the races and had an uncanny ability to pick losers.

At the end of his first month of knowing Gwen, George had withdrawn slightly less than ten thousand dollars from the Bailey Corners First National.

And the semi-annual audit was less than a week away. Any halfway intelligent auditor would discover the shortage in bank funds in a morning's work, and the first individual to come under suspicion would be George. But George had a solution for that, too.

It was the height of the fruit-picking season in the area, and the packing sheds that were Bailey Corners' chief industry were working two and three shifts. Friday was payday and the tellers kept extra money at their windows to take care of heavy check cashing.

On Thursday night George left the bank with two thousand dollars, the largest single withdrawal yet.

On Fridays the Number One window, George's, was kept open most of the day. On ordinary days his window was only manned by George when one of the regular tellers was out of the bank.

A few minutes after the doors opened Friday morning, a medium-sized man in a brown suit with a plumb face, green eyes and sandy hair, a loose-lipped smile showing a gold-capped tooth, approached George's window and placed a scuffed attache case on its side in the window.

The man leaned in, broad shoulders effectively blocking the view of anyone who might get in line behind him. He said nothing, merely pushed a square piece of brown paper at George and raised the lid of the case a few inches.

Three minutes later the man in the brown suit closed the case, tucked it under his arm and strode briskly out. George slammed the window shut, ignoring the outraged complaints of the people in line. He watched until the man passed through the doors and was

swallowed up by the heavy sidewalk foot traffic.

Then George lowered his head, squeezed his eyes shut and counted to two hundred slowly. His heart pounded unevenly.

Finally he opened his eyes, threw his head back and bayed, "Robber! Holdup!"

Mr. Fairchild was at his side immediately. "What? What, George?"

George waved the piece of brown wrapping paper under Mr. Fairchild's nose and pointed a trembling finger at the door. "Holdup! The man in the brown suit who just walked out!"

Mr. Fairchild snatched the note from George, clucked, then read it aloud: "This is a stickup. Give me all the money in your drawer. If you raise an alarm before I'm gone at least two minutes, a lot of people will be killed. You too."

Mr. Fairchild clucked again, then suddenly stormed into action, bounding to the nearest telephone.

The bank had no alarm system, and Mr. Fairchild had standing instructions for any teller who was held up to hand over all cash on hand and never under any circumstances offer resistance. A human life was more valuable than money.

George was grateful for Mr. Fairchild's humane instincts.

Ten minutes later George was describing the holdup man to Doug Slater, Bailey Corners' aging chief of police.

"He wore a brown suit," George said. "He had a thin face, black hair and black eyes. Very good, white teeth."

The girl who tended the window next to George on Fridays spoke up. "I think I noticed that man out of the corner of one eye. I thought . . . Sandy hair?"

George deliberated a moment before saying firmly, "No, Betty. I'm positive. Black hair, straight black hair."

"Any distinguishing marks, George?"

Without hesitation George said, "Not that I noticed, Chief."

"And about how much do you figure he got?"

"I'd have to check. At a rough estimate, twelve thousand."

At eleven o'clock the next evening George stood on a dark street corner in a small town just outside of Fresno. He was wearing gloves and a topcoat against the evening chill. After a few minutes' wait a small car pulled up to the curb. George got in and the car drove away. A few blocks and they were out of town, bumping along on unpaved road.

The man at the wheel turned his face toward George, and light from the dash glinted off the gold in his mouth.

"Did you bring it?"

"Of course," George said. "Did you think I wouldn't?" He took an envelope from his pocket and laid it on the seat between them. "A

thousand dollars, just like I promised."

The driver pulled the car off the road and stopped, switching off the motor. He picked up the envelope and tapped it against the wheel.

"The papers this morning said the holdup man got twelve thousand."

George sighed. "Why should that concern you?"

"It seems to me I'm getting the dirty end of the stick here."

"The dirty end of the stick in what way? You walk into a bank, lean into a teller's window for three minutes and walk out. There was absolutely no danger to you and for that you get paid a thousand dollars."

"Just the same, there's eleven grand floating around somewhere I don't even get a sniff at."

"For the sake of my curiosity, just how much do you think you're entitled to?"

"I figure at least half."

George half-turned in the seat, ramming one hand down into his topcoat pocket. "And if I don't accede to your . . . blackmail, you will perhaps drop a hint to the bank or to the authorities? And that hint will, as the saying goes, open up a whole new can of peas?"

His seatmate stirred uneasily. "Blackmail is a pretty strong word, Mr. Reardon. I just figure I'm entitled . . ."

"Entitled? You most certainly are."

George pulled the gun out of his pocket and shot the man twice at close range. Having never fired a gun before, he was taking no chances. As the driver started to slump over the wheel, George caught him and eased him down on the seat, then dropped the gun onto the floorboards.

He retrieved the envelope with the money and got out of the car. There was no need to waste money so hard to come by. Gwen had expressed a desire for a fur coat for Christmas; a thousand dollars would do nicely for that.

George started the two mile hike back into town.

There was very little to connect him with the dead man. He had found him in a bar in Sacramento and made his proposition to which the man had agreed eagerly. Later George had made discreet inquiries and had learned that his partner in crime had an impressive police record. The man found murdered, the police would tag it a case of crooks falling out and confine their investigation accordingly.

The gun George had purchased in a Sacramento pawnshop, using the dead man's name, and the typewriter on which George had typed the note had been bought in another pawnshop and now reposed on the bottom of the Sacramento River.

Of course, if there was ever any suspicion of George being connected with the dead man in any way,

a careful investigation would likely tie them together in a neat package. But there would never be any cause for an investigation. The missing bank money was now accounted for. No suspicion would ever attach to George.

And after the auditors were finished, there would be a whole six months before they came snooping around again!

Trudging along, George had to grin wryly at his thought processes. Once he would never have considered an auditor's duties as snooping.

George got back into town in time to catch the next bus to Fresno. In Fresno he went directly to Gwen's apartment and let himself in with his key. A drowsy Gwen rose from the soft depths of the couch and greeted him with open arms. And a few minutes later when he gave her the envelope she squealed, "Georgie-Porgie, you're a living dollbaby!"

All in all, it was a very satisfactory night for Georgie-Porgie.

George made no withdrawals the following week. He could wait. He had plans, plans expanding his horizons. He had tentatively mentioned South America to Gwen. She had been agreeable, asking only one question, "Will there be enough money, Georgie-Porgie?"

"There'll be enough, Gwen. That I promise you."

He calculated that he could withdraw enough funds during the next six months to keep them in luxury for several years in South America. After that, something else would crop up. He was confident of that. It was amazing what the past two months had done to his confidence in himself.

His annual vacation came near the end of the six month period between this audit and the next. There would be plenty of time within that two-week vacation to fly to South America with Gwen and get settled in, perhaps with a new identity for both of them.

Yes, that would be best. He hated the thought of changing his name, hated the thought of never hearing Gwen's "Georgie-Porgie" again, but some sacrifices would be necessary.

The team of auditors, a pair of men dressed in gray and looking enough alike to be twins, came in early on Thursday morning. They seemed to lose themselves somewhere in the bank. George saw them only three times during the day, flitting about like gray ghosts.

Everyone had gone when George locked the vault and prepared to make his own departure. As he started past the front part of the bank, he saw Mr. Fairchild still at his desk behind the partition.

After a brief hesitation George started on. Mr. Fairchild glanced up.

"Oh, George! Could you come in for a minute, please?"

George pushed through the waist-high swinging gate and, at Mr. Fairchild's gesture, took the chair before the man's desk.

"George . . ." Mr. Fairchild paused, cleared his throat, clucked twice rapidly. "I was just going over the auditor's preliminary report. It seems . . . distressing and unbelievable as it sounds . . . that there is a ten thousand dollar shortage . . ."

George experienced a moment of painful hindsight. Antic laughter clogged his throat. Art! Art Thomas hadn't fallen under the wheels of that truck! He had thrown himself there on purpose. He had dipped into the bank for ten thousand and then hadn't the ingenuity to extricate himself.

And for a brief moment George was sure he heard the trill of Mother's laughter. "You see what can happen, George, when I'm not there to . . . ?"

George shook his head violently to clear it.

Mr. Fairchild was still speaking. ". . . an investigation into the source of the shortage is called for. And you, George, as vault teller, will be. . . ."

Mr. Fairchild broke off, clucked once, and reached for the phone on his desk.

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